

THE GLOBAL INDIAN

# THE RISE OF SIKHS ABROAD

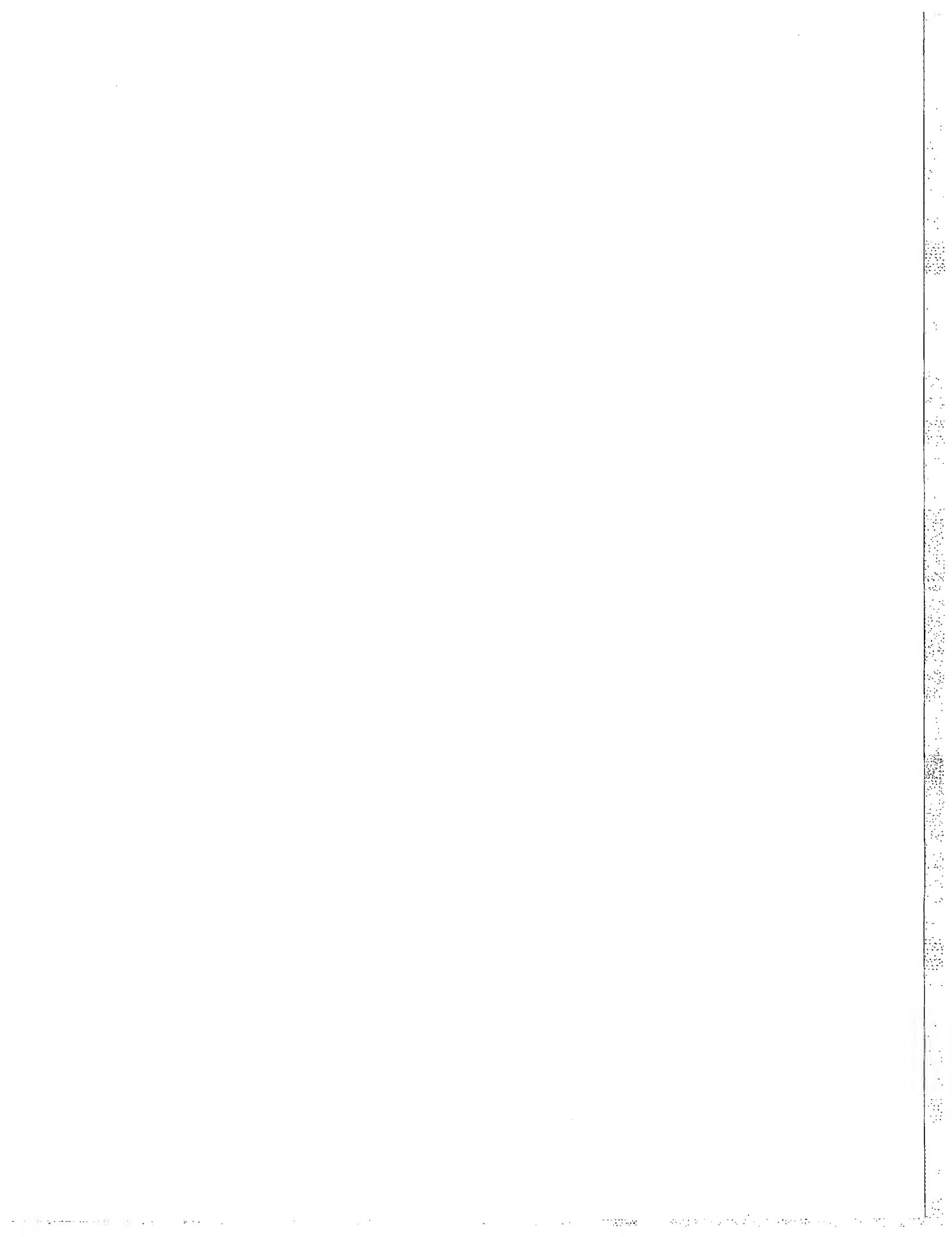
GURMUKH SINGH



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THE RISE OF

# SIKHS ABROAD



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SIKHS ABROAD

GURMUKH SINGH

Rupa & Co

*Be a man  
Take a chance  
Bet the farm  
And don't look back*

— Anonymous

Text ©Gurmukh Singh 2003

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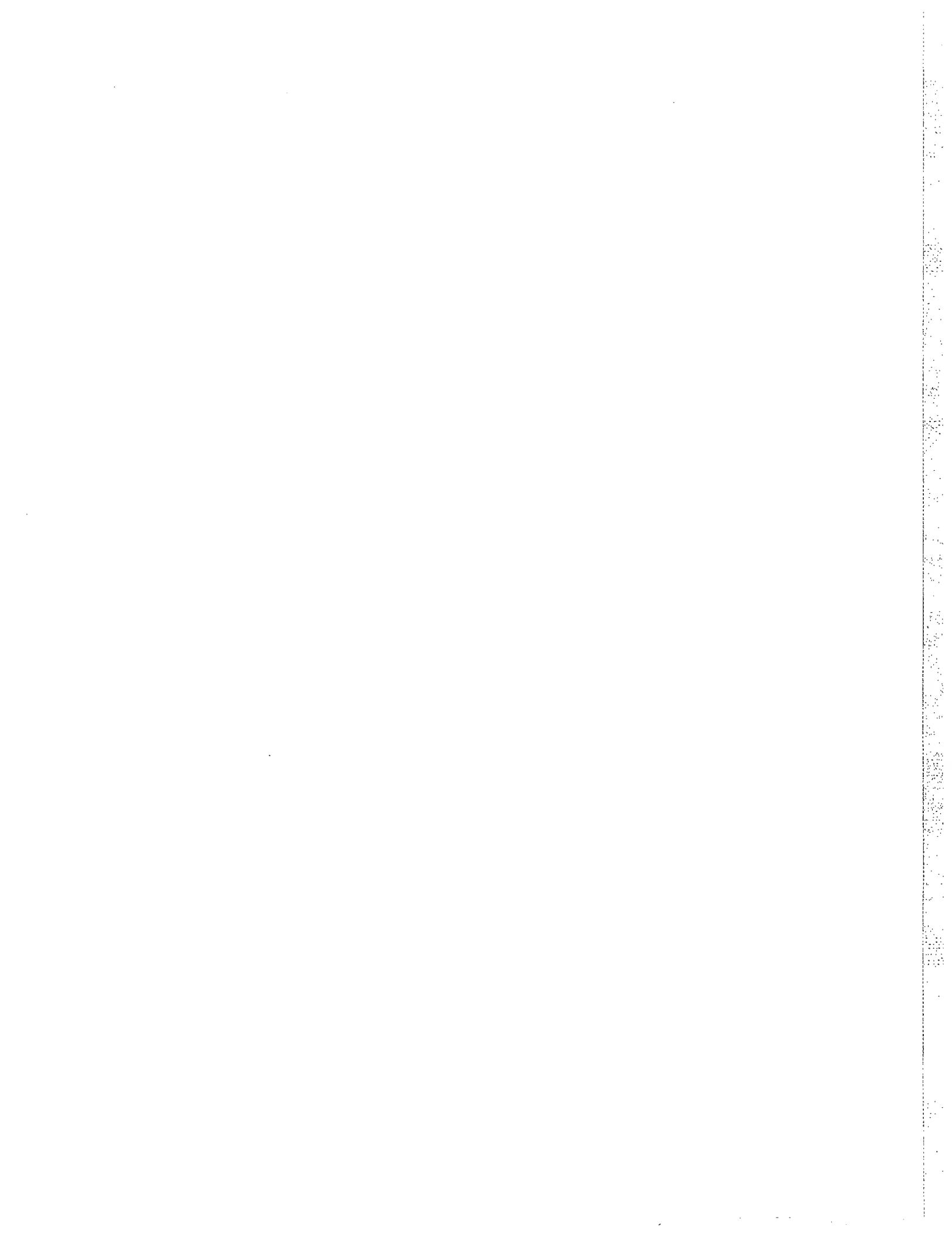
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The last year of the last millennium marked not only the tercentenary of the Khalsa but also the first century of Punjabis abroad and the rise of one of them — Ujjal Dosanjh — to the post of premier in Canada. To commemorate the occasion, my friend, Vikramjit Sahney of the World Punjabi Organisation, and I planned this book project.

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Thank you all once again.

**Gurmukh Singh**  
New Delhi,  
April 4, 2003.

# INTRODUCTION

*'No self-image of India can be complete without a reference to its diaspora. Contrary to the myth that we Indians have been reluctant to travel abroad, a good part of our history is enacted outside India. The role of the Indian diaspora in mediating between India and the world and in shaping each's perception of the other needs to be fully appreciated than is the case at present. The karmabhoomi of Indians is as much at home as outside it; there are many little and large Indias outside India, and part of India lies outside its territorial boundaries. It was only this January (2003) that this aspect of Indian identity was publicly acknowledged and celebrated.'*

— Lord Bhiku Parekh

True. With India deciding to grant dual citizenship to Non-Resident Indians from a few developed countries and celebrating 9 January as Parvasi Bharati Divas every year, the importance of the 20-million Indian diaspora certainly assumes a vital significance in nation-building.

The accomplishments of overseas Indians are astounding and inspirational. Since one volume could not have done justice to them, this book focuses only on one segment: the Sikhs. They constitute about 40 per cent of the Indian diaspora in the US, 70 per cent in Canada and 40 per cent in Britain.

The attacks on them in America, Australia and elsewhere after the 11 September 2001 terror strikes in New York and Washington only brought them into sharp focus. With their flowing beards and turbans, the Sikhs were mistaken for Arab Muslims and subjected to racial attacks. These incidents highlighted the fact that Sikhs are a global community today. As scholar E.J.B. Rose says, 'The Sikhs are perhaps the most mobile and versatile people in the whole of India.'

Anthropologist Verne A. Dusenberry, in his book titled *The Sikh Diaspora: Migration and the Experience Beyond Punjab*, adds, 'The Sikhs are people willing to pursue opportunities anywhere in the world to make a better life for themselves and their families. Indeed, while the Punjab, the historical birthplace of the Sikh Panth, remains the Sikh "heartland", perhaps a third of the world's Sikhs (numbering more than 2.5 million today) have made their temporary or permanent residence outside Punjab.'

Why do the sons of Punjab keep looking for greener pastures abroad?

For centuries, they had faced invaders from Central Asia. The saying '*Punjab de jamiyan nu nit muhiman*', (Punjab-born are condemned to be on the war campaign), can be traced to these uncertain times.

Nature has equipped the Punjabi well. The invasions from the northwest only helped develop his physical strength. Punjabi folklore is replete with the exploits of the likes of wrestler Gama.

His carefree nature has made the Punjabi a romantic as also receptive to new ideas. He is endowed with an unparalleled sense of humour.

Not surprisingly, the world's funniest gag (out of 40,000 received from 70 countries) in the year 2002 was coined by a British Sikh, Gurpal Gossal. The gag runs like this: Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his cellphone and calls the emergency services. He gasps, 'My friend is dead! What can I do?' The operator says, 'Calm down, I can help. First, let's make sure he is dead.' There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says, 'OK, now what?'

This trait manifested itself in the legendary love stories of Heer-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahiwal, Sasi-Punnu and Mirza-Sahiban. And it manifested itself in an exploratory streak.

Panini wrote the world's first treatise on Sanskrit grammar and Valmiki wrote the *Ramayana* on Punjab soil. The *Rig Veda* was written on the banks of the river Beas.

The Buddha found the Punjab of his time spiritually and intellectually fertile and sent his disciples to the Land of the Five Rivers, as Punjab is also known, to 'explore and experiment' in search of new ideas. Consequently, Buddhism spread in Punjab (including today's Pakistan and Afghanistan). Buddhist centres of learning came up in different places, including the world's first university at Taxila (now in Pakistan).

Punjab also proved to be the turning point for Alexander the Great who was on his mission to conquer the world. He abandoned his campaign after his verbal duel with the defeated Punjab king, Porus. When Porus was produced before Alexander, he was asked how he should be treated. Porus said: 'The way one king should treat another.'

Once Alexander saw some Brahmins engaged in an animated discussion among themselves. They completely ignored him. When he questioned them about their discussion, they replied: 'King Alexander, every man can possess only so much of the earth's surface as this we are standing on. You are but human like the rest of us, save that you are always busy and up to no good, travelling so many miles from your home, a nuisance to yourself and to others. Ah, well! You will soon be dead, and then you will own just as much of this earth as will suffice to bury you.'

In Taxila, Alexander also met members of the Indian sect of Wise Men who walked around naked. He admired their powers of endurance so much that he decided to take one of them with him. The oldest man among them, whose name was Dandamis (the

others were his pupils), refused either to join Alexander or to permit any of his pupils to do so. ‘If you, my lord,’ he is said to have replied, ‘are the son of God — so am I. I want nothing from you, for what I have is sufficient. I perceive, moreover, that the men you lead don’t get much from their worldwide wandering over land and sea, and that of their many journeys there will be no end. I desire nothing that you can give me; I fear no exclusion from any blessings which may perhaps be yours. India, with the fruits of her soil in due season, is enough for me while I live; and when I die, I shall be rid of my poor body.’

Alexander is said to have shaken his head and remarked: ‘What a race! Both the king and the ascetic are speaking the same language!’ And he retreated.

In fifteenth-century Punjab rose the religion of Sikhism. Its pacifist founder, Guru Nanak, preached equality of men and oneness of God, challenged the casteist and feudal system, and wrote lyrical poetry in praise of God.

The last Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, turned Sikhs into a martial race to challenge the mighty Mughal Empire. The valiant Sikhs took on the invaders from across the Khyber Pass. Later, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who was coronated in Lahore in 1802, went on to establish the great Sikh secular empire. The tide of inward flow into Punjab was stemmed forever.

The outward flow (from Punjab) began in the nineteenth century when the British took over Punjab in 1849, (the last Indian bastion to fall to the British), and absorbed the Khalsa Army into the British forces. Sikh soldiers were sent to guard British interests in Singapore, Malaya, Hong Kong and Burma. Later, the famine in the 1860s further worsened conditions, forcing people to seek opportunities abroad.

When the anti-colonial feeling grew in India, particularly after the Jallianwala Bagh (Amritsar) massacre in 1919, many Sikhs went abroad to champion India’s cause. (More than eighty per cent of those who went to the gallows during British rule were Sikhs.)

Indentured labour and artisans headed for East Africa to build railroads. Most Sikhs in East Africa moved to Britain when Kenya became independent in 1963, and Idi Amin expelled them from Uganda in 1972-73.

Some Sikh traders went to Thailand in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The first Sikh to set foot on British soil was Maharaja Duleep Singh, the son of legendary Maharaja Ranjit Singh, after the fall of the Sikh Empire in 1849. Then followed Sikh traders, and students pursuing higher studies. Immigration into Britain picked up after the Second World War. Today, there are more than half a million Sikhs in Britain. There is a fair sprinkling in Germany, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Italy and Belgium as well.

Sikh influx into North America began towards the end of the nineteenth century when Hong Kong-based Sikh soldiers in the British Army passed through Canada following Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in London in 1897. They saw huge farming opportunities in Canada. On retirement from the British Army, many boarded ships to

San Francisco or Vancouver. Impoverished farmers from Punjab followed their trail. Then came in students and Ghadar Party revolutionaries.

Sikh immigrants worked on farms in California and in sawmills in Canada. As their numbers swelled, laws were enacted to keep them out. When the US and Canada granted them citizenship rights in 1947, a new phase in Sikh immigration was inaugurated.

By 2002, there were more than a million Sikhs in North America.

A number of Sikhs reached Australia and New Zealand in the nineteenth century. Their number has increased manifold, particularly since the 1970s.

In the first year of the new millennium, there were about 15,000 Sikhs in Australia and about 4,000 in New Zealand.

If the early Sikhs were security guards and watchmen in East Asia and East Africa; lumberjacks and farm hands in North America; and cameleers, hawkers and cane cutters in Australia; the contemporary Sikhs are breaking all barriers to reach the top in all professions.

Canada's Herb Dhaliwal is the first South Asian to become a federal minister anywhere in the western world. Ujjal Dosanjh created history in February 2000 by becoming the first-ever coloured premier in Canada, and the western world. Gurbux Malhi is the first turban-wearing member of any parliament in the West.

Didar Singh Bains of Northern California is one of the world's largest producers of peaches. Darshan Singh Dhaliwal is one of the biggest gas station owners in America.

Yogi Harbhajan has spread the Sikh message in the western hemisphere.

Mota Singh is Britain's first Asian and Sikh judge. When he first won in 1992, Piara Singh Khabra was the first Sikh member of parliament in Britain. Today, Marsha Singh and Parmjit Dhandha are other two Sikh MPs in the British House of Commons. Tarsem King is the first Sikh Lord.

Sant Chatwal of New York owns the largest number of hotel rooms in Manhattan, and the famous Bombay Palace chain of restaurants. Inder Singh of Los Angeles heads the largest body of Non-Resident Indians — the Global Organization of the People of Indian Origin (GOPIO). Dr Amarjit Singh Marwaha, who was one of the first Indian doctors to land in the US in the 1950s, is one of the most famous Sikhs of Los Angeles.

Sanjeev Sidhu is considered one of the richest Indians in the US. Dr Manjit Singh Bains of New York is one of the best lung cancer specialists in the US. Dr Narinder Kapany is called the 'czar' of fibre optics in California.

Sitarist Harvinder Singh of Stockholm is a world famous exponent of Indian and western classical music. Tiger Jeet Singh's son, Tiger Ali Singh, was the first Asian face on the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). Kartar Singh Thakral of Singapore is one of the richest Sikhs in the world.

Choor Singh Sidhu was the first Sikh judge in Singapore. Inderjit Singh and Devinder Singh are two Sikh members of parliament in Singapore. Sarwan Singh Gill was the first Sikh chief justice of Malaysia. Karpal Singh is the topmost lawyer and the deputy leader of the Opposition in Malaysia. Mahima Singh was the first MP to be elected in the first-ever elections in independent Malaysia.

Pritam Singh is the ‘keeper’ of the Sikh community in Indonesia. Dr Inderjit Singh Virdi is rated as one of the top five cardiologists in Australia. Gian Singh Bains is one of the richest cane farmers Down Under.

What do these women — Neena Gill, first Indian-born member of the European Parliament; Ajit Tiwana, first South Asian woman to join the Royal Canadian Mounted Police; Sukhi Turner, mayor of Dunedin City in New Zealand; Kavelle Bajaj, among the top fifteen women entrepreneurs in the US; Kanwaljit Soin, first nominated member of the Singapore Parliament and first woman surgeon of Singapore; Gurinder Chadha, known film maker in England; and Amrita Cheema, a known face on German television — have in common? It is their Sikh roots.

And the diaspora is full of rags-to-riches stories. Kanwal Rekhi, who is known as the sage of Silicon Valley, was thrown out of three jobs before he found his calling. Sonny Chabra, who owns a multimillion-dollar software company in New York, once sold jeans on the pavements in Manhattan.

Jessie Singh, who is worth millions in Silicon Valley today, was once a pizza delivery boy. Gary Singh, who is a top-notch broker in Toronto, used to work as a security guard to pay his university fees.

Tony Deep Wouhra, who owns the multi-million pound East End Foods in Britain, once sold eggs on the streets of London.

Ajit Singh, who became the first Sikh civil servant in Malaysia and the first secretary-general of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), rose from a log cabin. Herb Doman, who is Canada’s richest Sikh, toiled for ten cents an hour as a fourteen-year-old kid.

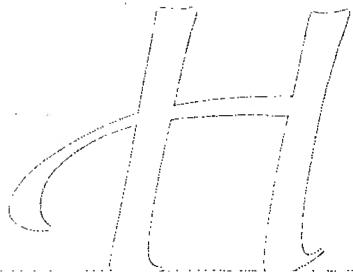
Indeed, the Sikh diaspora has made strides of continental proportions. There are many Punjabs away from Punjab: Southall in London, Yuba City in California, Woolgoolga in Australia, and Surrey in British Columbia. Punjabis have become truly global.

This is not an exhaustive list by any means, but an attempt has been made to capture the diaspora’s changing profile in the contemporary world. The focus is entirely on those countries where Sikhs are growing in numbers.



BRITAIN:

ON THE KOHINOOR TRAIL



Heathrow airport, Southall and East End in London, and Soho Road in Birmingham, look like an extension of Punjab. Day and night, droves of Sikh passengers land at Heathrow to melt into the neighbouring Southall.

Banker P.S. Chawla driving into Southall for a rendezvous with the local Sikh MP, Piara Singh Khabra, says, 'In front of us is the famous Punjabi Glassy Junction where you can buy beer in Indian currency. To our left is the office of the Punjabi newspaper *Des Pardes*. To our right is the Southall gurdwara. You really don't miss Punjab here.'

Indeed, one feels transported back to Punjab.

Punjabi crowds throng Asian-owned shops in Southall to buy groceries, garments, and Punjabi music. Adds Chawla, 'It is here in Southall that many Sikh success stories began. Southall sits not far from Central London and Heathrow. So, in the 1950s, many Sikh immigrants got off the plane or train and went no further than Southall because they easily found work in labour-short rubber and plastic factories.' Over the years, the Asian influx has changed the demographic profile of Southall. Today, they account for more than fifty per cent of the population, with the Sikhs being a majority community. Not surprisingly, Southall created history in 1992 by electing a Sikh, Piara Singh Khabra, as their MP. Khabra (Labour Party) has won thrice since.

In the 2001 general election, Southall witnessed a contest between two men from Jalandhar district — Khabra and the Sunrise Radio owner Avtar Lit.

Southall-based Sunrise Radio is the largest Asian commercial radio in the world, catering to millions of Asians in Europe and elsewhere.

Ranjit Dheer, the well-known Sikh author, is currently the mayor of Southall.

The Glassy Junction apart, the busy Southall Broadway houses Jalebi Junction, Lahori Karahi and scores of tandoori restaurants. 'Remember, the first *chaat* shop in Britain was set up by Brij Mohan Gupta in Southall,' says Balwant Singh Kapoor of the Indian Overseas Congress based in London.

The place is filled with Sikh-owned shops. The street signs are in Punjabi. Bhangra tunes fill the air. Local bands and DJs such as Heera, Alaap and Premi have enriched bhangra by fusing it with western music.

Come Diwali, and Southall teems with Indians from all over Britain.

It is here that Guru Nanak Sikh College was set up in 1993 to promote Sikh education.

Sitting in his frugal office in Southall, the left-leaning MP, Piara Singh Khabra, who in 1992 became the first Asian to enter the House of Commons, says, 'Southall mirrors the rise of Sikhs in Britain. I am an MP. Mota Singh was the first Asian to become a judge in Britain. Tarsem King has just been anointed a Lord. Gurbux Singh has been the chairman of the Racial Equality Commission. Many other Sikhs hold positions of power. Bawa Singh Dhalla, Gurdip Singh Dhillon, H.S. Wadhwani, Mohinder Singh Chhina, Jaswant Bains, Gurbachan Singh Thind and Amarjit Singh have risen to become mayors in recent years.'

Picking up a copy of the *Sunday Times* of London from a pile, he says, 'This says it all.' Listing the top twenty young achievers in Great Britain, the newspaper notes, 'Rueben Singh, entrepreneur, is dubbed Europe's Bill Gates. Runs property, investment and currency trading companies. Sold his first company (in February 1999) for 22 million pounds. Breakfasts with Prime Minister. Backs young entrepreneurs.'

A nice summing up of the Sikh success story in Britain.

Chairman of the RS Group of Companies with interests in computers, real estate and venture capital, Manchester-born Rueben Singh is the youngest man in Fortune's rich list. As of 2002, his worth was a hundred and fifty million pounds. Kicking off his business career with women's accessories — he called his company Miss Attitude — at the age of 18 with just five hundred pounds, Rueben Singh has gone on to establish fourteen companies in just eight years. The young Sikh is in a tearing hurry to become a billionaire. He is not content with being a multi-millionaire.

'Sikh multi-millionaires? No big deal. There are hundreds of them,' laughs the editor of *Asian Who's Who*, Jasbir Sachar, of London.

'Not only are we in the upper bracket, but we are also now an integral part of the British mosaic,' adds Walsall-based Mohinder Singh Kohli, who owns the landmark Melbourne House estate that once belonged to the Royals.

Another Lahore-born Sikh, Iqbal Singh, famously known as the Lord of Butley Manor, owns an estate in Suffolk in Scotland that once belonged to Henry VIII. Singh, who came to Britain in 1959 to pursue medical studies and later made millions from real estate, bought the royal property in 1986 at the village of Lesmahagow near Glasgow.



(Top): People like Baljit Kaur of Birmingham have made ethnic things like *mehndi* very popular in Britain.

(Above): Bawa Singh Dhallu is one of the many Sikh mayors in Britain.

(Left): Young Sikh millionaire Rueben Singh aspires to become the Bill Gates of Europe.

He won the hearts of the Scots by opening his castle to the flood-hit people in the area in 1994. He has named his Vacsay Island after the poet Robert Burns and commissioned the translation of Burns' poems into Punjabi. The Lord Sardar is also credited with creating the famous Singh tartan (on the pattern of the native tartan) for the Sikh kids in Scotland.

From being the target of racist attacks in the 1960s to Lordship and other top positions, Sikhs in Britain have come a long way.

Britain's minister for community relations, Michael O'Brian, acknowledged this at the Sikh Forum tercentenary gathering in London in October 1999, saying, 'The Sikhs are an integral part of Britain's multi-racial society.'

Prime Minister Tony Blair also lauded the community during the tercentenary celebrations. Years ago, England's chief justice, Lord Lane, paid the best compliment to the community when he said, 'The Sikhs are one of the most respected and respectable communities' in Britain. Over the years, Sikhs have multiplied and thrived on British soil.

By 2002, there were more than half a million Sikhs in Britain. The enterprising community has in its ranks members of parliament, mayors, professors, councillors, businessmen, surgeons, scientists, radio and TV station owners, bankers, writers, comedians and music stars.

Who does not know Lord Tarsem King, Judge Mota Singh, Commission for Racial Equality chairman Gurbux Singh, 'Agony Aunt' Kailash Puri, Sikh Forum's Ranjit Singh, Nishkam Sevak Jatha president Bhai Mohinder Singh, banker Pritpal Singh Chawla, *Des Pardes* editor G.S.Virk, Nova of London's Ajinderpal Chawla, East End Foods' Tony Deep Wouhra, KTC Edibles' Santokh Singh Khaira, *Asian Who's Who* editor Jasbir Sachar, percussionist Talvin Singh, and pop stars Bally Sagoo and Malkit Singh?

Punjabi kids in Birmingham are more fluent in Punjabi than their counterparts in Chandigarh or Patiala! Words like *kidan edan* roll off their tongues as easily as 'all right'. Not surprisingly, Birmingham has turned out to be the nursery of bhangra. The men from Birmingham — Malkit Singh, Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo — have put Punjabi pop on the world music map.

'The colonies are striking back — culturally. Today, the best Punjabi music emanates from the West, not the East. Bhangra tunes sway the *goras* today,' says Bally Sagoo, sitting in his Currywood Studios in Birmingham.

The bhangra mania has spawned scores of *dhol* academies across Britain. 'Thanks to bhangra, drums are the rage in Britain,' says *dhol* blaster Gurcharan Mall of Birmingham.

With such a large Punjabi population in Britain, it is inevitable that Punjabi weeklies *Des Pardes* and *Punjab Times International* boast huge circulations.

The late Amar Chatwal's *Sikh Courier* is the second oldest Sikh publication after *Sikh Review* of Calcutta.



(Above): The famous Glassy Junction in Southall where you can pay in Indian rupees.

(Right): Gurcharan Mall has made *dhol* popular among the Whites.



Britain is dotted with Sikh gurdwaras. ‘There are more than three hundred gurdwaras in the country, with London boasting forty and Birmingham fifteen. Dates for kirtan and langar are fixed in advance,’ says International Punjabi Society president Gurdip Singh Gujral.

On Birmingham’s Soho Road stands Europe’s biggest gurdwara. Built on 2.4 acres in 1978, it is run by the famous Guru Nanak Nishkam Sevak Jatha that carried out the gold work at the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Its 110-foot dome, made of white marble imported from Greece, is a magnificent part of the Birmingham skyline.

At its helm is Bhai Mohinder Singh. An engineer by profession, he explains how the shrine has incorporated the high-tech in its day-to-day operations. ‘We maintain recordings of all important events. Let the pictures speak and there be no misconceptions about any issue.’

Mohinder Singh, who quit as a chief engineer in Zambia to take on this religious responsibility, says, ‘The gurdwara has twenty-two fully equipped rooms for visitors and six halls where the Guru Granth Sahib is recited round the clock. We also hold special kirtan classes for children.’

For the gold work at the Golden Temple, the Nishkam Sevak Jatha hired the best artisans from Varanasi and Rajasthan. ‘The original job was simply to put new gold plates on the old ones installed during Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s time. But when we undertook the actual work, we found that the old plates had rusted. The walls also needed repair. So, we thought about the pros and cons of gold plating and gold gilding, and sought Russian help to check which method would work better. Ultimately, we opted for gold gilding. As against twelve layers which consumed a quintal of gold in the nineteenth century, we used twenty-four layers that will last three hundred and fifty years,’ says Mohinder Singh.

The Jatha, he says, is now looking forward to performing the *kar seva* on the interiors of the Golden Temple.

The village melas of Punjab have also been a common feature in Britain since the 1960s, with Coventry being the venue of the oldest mela. The Satguru Partap Singh Hockey Tournament is a big annual draw in Britain.

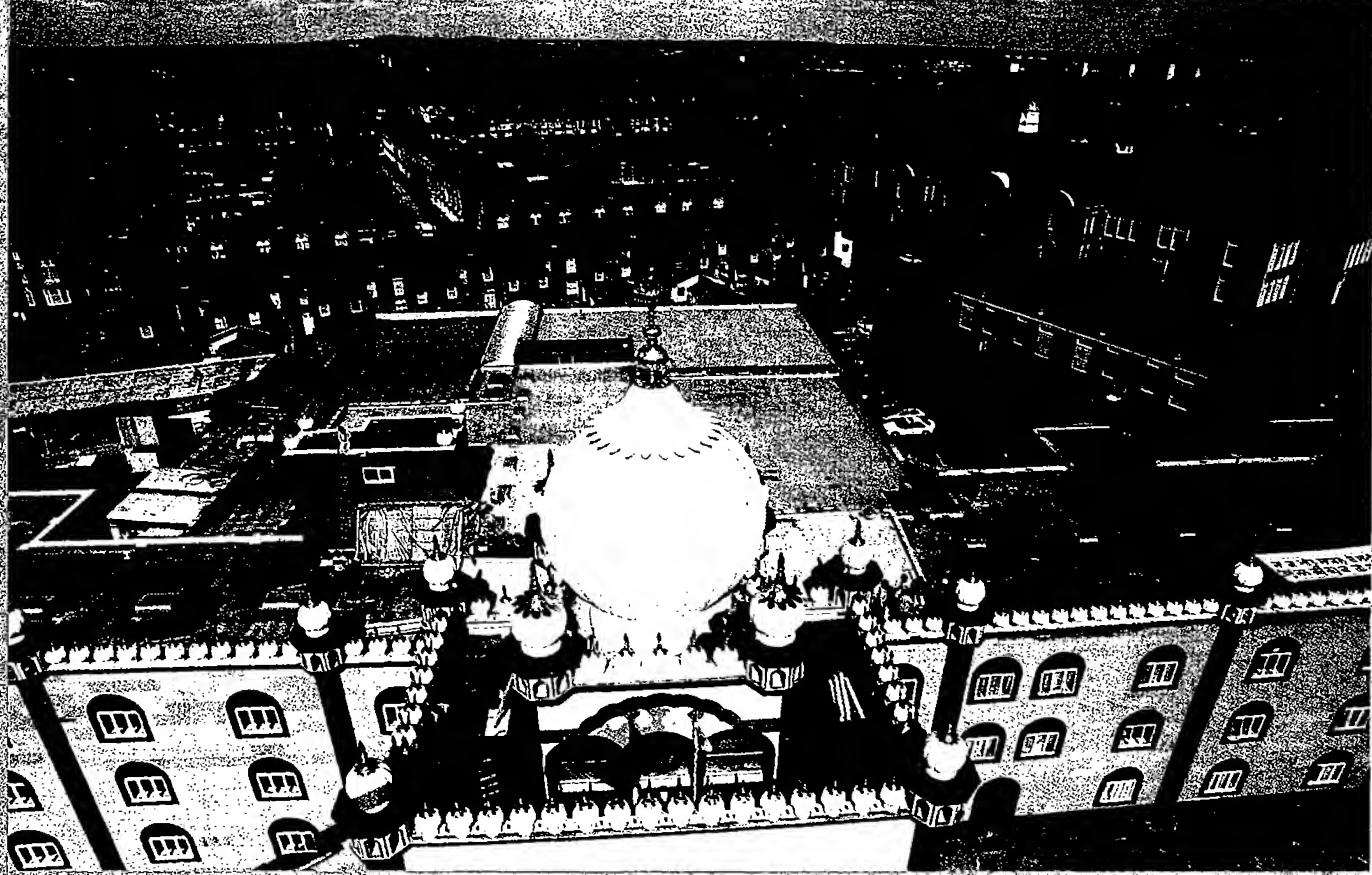
Line judge Bir Singh Mhajan has been a familiar face on Wimbledon courts for the past thirty years. Thumbing through albums in his study, Mhajan says, ‘My turban has made me very famous. Though there are about three hundred umpires at Wimbledon, the camera is focused on me.’

Newspapers and magazines have devoted pages to him and his no nonsense umpiring.

Writing about him, tennis magazine *Serve & Volley* says, ‘Mhajan has been snapped as much as the Tower of London and Buckingham Palace and his strong turbaned features find room in countless photo albums from Boston to San Diego. HBO did A Day In The Life on him. When he shouts “out”, he booms OUT.’



The famous Sikh face at Wimbledon: Bir Singh Mhajan.



(Above): Soho Road Gurdwara in Birmingham is one of the biggest Sikh shrines in Europe.

(Top left): Bhai Mohinder Singh, of Soho Road Gurdwara, whose Nishkam Sewak Jatha carried out the gold gilding at the Golden Temple in Amritsar in 1999.

Mhajan, whose father Jodh Singh Mhajan worked with the Kenyan Police, took to tennis after a stint as a hockey coach. In 1972, he moved to England where the All-England Association roped him in as an umpire.

'Soon I was elevated to Wimbledon. I have also stood in all the major tournaments — Davis Cup, Stella Artois, Eastbourne — where I have umpired in hundreds of matches,' says Mhajan.

Mhajan does it for free. 'Doing umpiring at Wimbledon is a reward in itself,' says the man who runs an export-import business. 'I am highly respected by all the players because of my fair calls. They all love to have me in their matches. It's a great honour when the top players tell me "I hope you'll be at my match". This shows how much confidence they have in me.'

The mild-mannered Sikh narrates his verbal run-ins with the temperamental player John McEnroe. 'In 1981, I was umpiring a doubles match in which the Amritraj brothers were pitted against McEnroe and Peter Fleming. McEnroe accused me of being biased in favour of the Indians. I told him that I was a Kenyan — just to provoke him. I'm very proud to be a Sikh-Indian. Again, in the 1983 doubles, McEnroe complained to the referee that he did not consider me to be competent. This provoked a shouting match between McEnroe and a spectator. McEnroe was fined £325,' Mhajan says.

Mhajan's son, Jaideep, is also a tennis coach and runs his own tennis club with twelve tennis courts and has produced many young players who are now playing for their counties and, hopefully, will play some day at Wimbledon.

Hailing the East African Sikhs for their accomplishments in Britain, Mhajan says, 'Though they were the last wave to come to Britain, they have done very well and Sikhs in Britain enjoy a tremendous name, especially among people who have read their history and know that Sikhs were the greatest allies of Britain in the two World Wars.'

While the East African Sikhs constituted the fourth wave of immigration into Britain, Maharaja Duleep Singh was the first Sikh to set foot on English soil in 1854. He had followed the Kohinoor that the British had seized from his kingdom and brought to London in 1851. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, many Sikh students came to London for higher studies. The British had brought Sikh peddlers from the Jalandhar area in the 1920s.

After the Partition of India, many refugees set out for Britain. But the big exodus occurred in the early 1960s when Britain mooted a new immigration Bill to restrict influx. Whole villages from Punjab landed in Britain in a matter of months. Troubles in East Africa in the '60s and '70s forced Sikhs to move to Britain.

Unfortunately, the Sikh influx into Britain coincided with a decline in jobs as manufacturing units closed in the Midlands.

As a result, anti-immigration feelings ran high. Political leaders added fuel to the fire. Tory Party leader Enoch Powell proposed that an immigrant should be given two thousand



(Above): Gurbux Singh was the first Sikh to head the high-powered Commission for Racial Equality.

(Left): Namdhari leader Rajinder Singh Chana with Prince Charles.



pounds and asked to leave Britain. The then Bradford MP, Frank McLeavy, said Britain couldn't be a welfare state for the whole of the Commonwealth.

Like other Asian groups, Sikhs also were subjected to racist attacks. 'In school, the Asian kids faced taunts. They were called "darky", "Paki", and "chocolate". Sikhs were waylaid, abused and their homes vandalized,' says Jasbir Sachar of *Asian Who's Who*.

Immigration became a major issue in the 1964 elections. In the surcharged atmosphere, the Indian Workers' Association (IWA) decided to throw in its lot with the Labour Party. 'This tie-up continues to this day because Labour's policies are in line with our interests,' says Piara Singh Khabra, who played an important role in the setting up of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) in 1977.

And in May 2000, Gurbux Singh became the first Sikh to head the CRE. 'I was one of the few people with an ethnic background to have risen this far. It is one of the highest posts in the public sector,' says Gurbux Singh, who quit the post in August 2002.

The CRE, he says, is 'a fifteen-member body based in London with 260 employees to provide legal assistance to victims of discrimination and carry out its own investigation whenever allegations of discrimination are brought to its notice.'

A first generation immigrant to Britain, Gurbux Singh was born in Jalandhar in 1950 and moved to Wolverhampton in 1957 to join his father who had reached Britain in 1953. He went to the University of Sussex for a degree in Political Science.

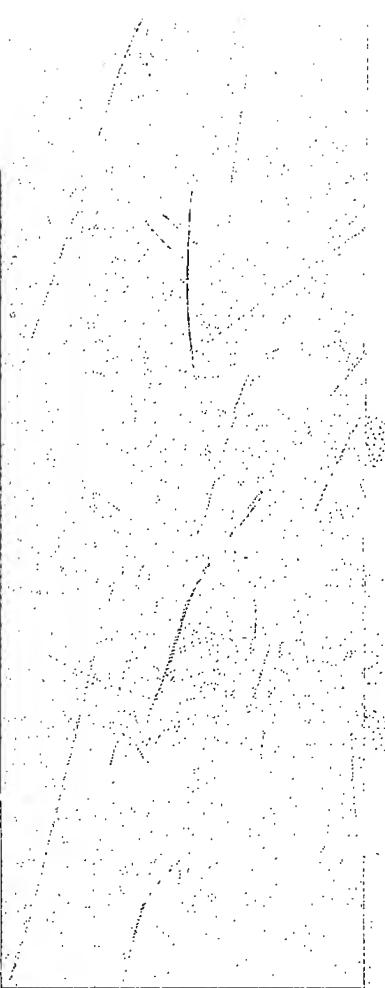
In 1972, he joined the Community Relations Commission as a housing specialist and stayed there till 1977. 'When the CRE was set up in 1977, I worked with it as a housing and local government policy specialist.'

In 1982, Singh moved to the Greater London Council. From there, he moved to the London Borough of Hackney and then to Brent. 'From 1987 till I became the CRE chief, I was with the Haringey Borough Council.'

When he took over the CRE, he set out his agenda, saying, 'I believe that a national consensus exists to build a new partnership between the CRE, the government, and leaders in the public, private and voluntary sectors, for a Britain which is socially just, inclusive and intolerant of racism. I will ensure that the CRE listens to the concerns of ethnic minority communities and these will be reflected in the agendas which focus the commission's work.'

The 2001 summer riots in Bradford and the aftermath of 9/11 made it "a very difficult year, a very depressing year" for him. Gurbux Singh sees nothing wrong with the new Race Relations Act which makes English language skills mandatory for new immigrants. 'What is wrong if a newcomer is asked to acquire language skills. After all, he is going to be part of this society.'

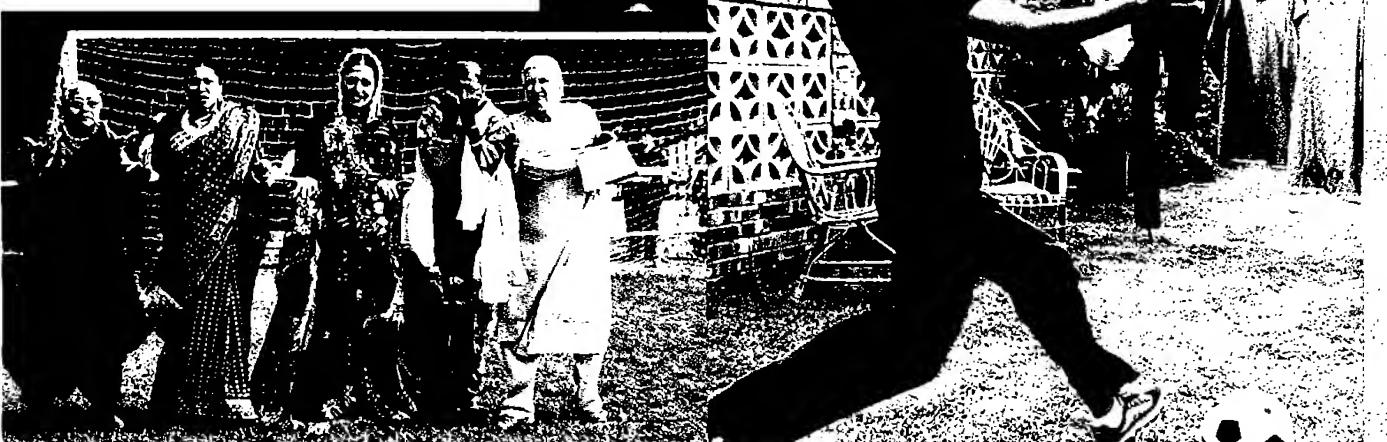
But he opposes new proposals on marriage. 'I welcome the proposals on citizenship which are aimed at creating a society where we have rights as equal citizens, but I don't subscribe to the proposals on marriage. It is up to the individual, not the state, whom or where he or she marries.'



(Above left): Kailash Puri is one of the most famous Punjabi writers in Britain.

(Above right): Famous writer, actress and playwright Meera Syal wrote the screenplay for the hit comedy *Bhaji on the Beach*. Her first novel *Anita and Me* won the Betty Trask Award. Wolverhampton-born Meera has also appeared in hit TV serials like *Absolutely Fabulous* and *Goodness Gracious Me*.

(Centre): Gurinder Chadha who made the hit comedy film *Bend It Like Beckham* (below) which stayed at the top of the UK charts for two consecutive weeks.





Gurbux Singh and Sibhan, his Irish wife, live in North London.

Cricket and football are his passion. And Sachin is his hero. 'Sachin is the best in the world, and I support him. Cricket has nothing to do with my patriotism,' he says.

What then is his identity?

'I have a multi-layered identity. I am proud of my Indian identity. But then I have a larger identity in this multi-cultural society,' he explains.

About the achievements of the Indian community, he says, 'Look at their businesses in London, Birmingham, Leicester and elsewhere. We have come a long way since the 1950s.'

Another housing specialist, who went on to become a member of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, is Neena Gill. She is the first woman of Asian origin to become an MP in Europe (Read more about Neena in the next chapter on Europe called Continental Gains).

Recalling the '40s, Kailash Puri, a resident of London since 1945, says, 'When my late husband, Gopal Singh, and I came here in 1945, there were only three or four Sikhs in London: Diwan Singh, Rawail Singh and Ram Singh Keith. It was a dreadful city after the end of the Second World War. Food was rationed. No phones, no lights. On Guru Nanak's birthday celebration in 1947 at the Shepherd's Bush gurdwara, I saw only a handful of people.'

This demure housewife went on to write tomes on yoga, meditation, cookery, women's problems and community affairs. Today, she is a novelist, marriage counsellor, agony aunt, yoga expert, nutritionist, public speaker and feminist. The intelligentsia listens with attention when she speaks at Oxford and Cambridge.

With dozens of books already to her credit, Puri claims she is the first Asian woman in Britain to explore taboo topics. 'I have written ten books which delve into sex and gender-related issues,' says Puri sitting in her Haven Green Court apartment in West London.

In the '90s, her programme *Dil Ki Baat* on TV Asia was a hit with the younger generation. 'The new generation comes to me with all kinds of problems created by the conflict between two cultures,' she says. If Puri is not penning books, she is rubbing shoulders with baronesses, duchesses and feminists. She is also the vice-president of Women for World Peace.

A Fellow of the Royal Society of Art (in 1998), Puri has also written her autobiography titled *Bar Jao Lakh Beriye*. Britain is also home to many other Sikh writers, including Harjit Atwal, Santokh Dhaliwal, Gurdial Rai, Baldev Singh, Pritam Sidhu, Shivcharan Gill, Darshan Dhir, Gurnam Gill, Swarn Chandan and Devinder Kaur.

Film-maker Gurinder Chadha is another Sikh woman of substance. Born in Kenya, raised in Britain and married to a Japanese-American based in Los Angeles, Gurinder straddles multiple cultures. And she has captured the experience through her films such as *Bhaji on the Beach*, *What's Cooking?* and *Bend it Like Beckham*. 'Multi-culturalism fascinates me,' says Gurinder, who started her career with BBC as a reporter and went on to direct many documentaries.

Her first documentary *I'm English But..* in 1989 revolve around young British Asians who are into non-traditional fusion music — a mixture of bhangra and rap.



Daljit Dhaliwal, the famous anchor on Primetime Channel Four News in Britain, is now with CNN at Atlanta where she hosts 'World News' and 'World Report'. Named one of '50 most beautiful people in the world' by People magazine in 1999 and listed as 'Women We Love' by Esquire magazine, Daljit has reported on all the major international news stories since 1994.



(Above): Bally Sagoo has re-invented bhangra for the Whites.

(Left): The millennium edition of the Guinness Book of Records says Malkit is the biggest selling bhangra star ever. With 20 albums already under his belt, Birmingham-based Malkit also holds the record of having performed live in 27 countries to date. His hit song *Gurh Naalo Ishq Mitha* was used by Mira Nair in her *Monsoon Wedding*. Gurinder Chadha's hit comedy film *Bend It Like Beckham* also features Malkit's *Jind Mahi*.

*Bhaji on the Beach*, her directorial debut as a feature film-maker, is a hilarious comedy that won many international awards. It explores the entangled world of a busload of Punjabi women who go on a picnic to Blackpool. *What's Cooking?* takes a look at the multi-cultural ambience of Los Angeles. Weddings, Gurinder says, are a great Indian fascination, and she has explored this theme through her eleven-minute short film titled *Nice Arrangement*. *Bend it Like Beckham* is the story of an eighteen-year-old girl who wants to be a professional footballer but faces opposition from her conservative Punjabi family.

Curiously, *Bhaji on the Beach* was the first-ever British feature film directed and written by two Asian women: Gurinder Chadha and Meera Syal.

Honoured with an MBE in 1997, Meera has been a permanent feature on the TV and theatre scene in the UK since her college days when she wrote the award-winning play *One of Us*. She was also the brain behind Channel 4's *Tandoori Nights* and Radio 4's *Masala FM*. Meera starred in BBC2's *Real McCoy* and went on to win the Betty Trask Award for her debut novel *Anita and Me*.

From art to music.

Wherever Punjabis have gone, bhangra has travelled with them. Britain is no exception.

In fact, bhangra has reborn here with Birmingham boys — Malkit Singh and Bally Sagoo — adding a western flavour to it.

'From the Pachangi group in the '60s to dozens of groups and solos, including Heeras, Alap, Stereo Nation, Apache Indian, Bally Sagoo, Tarsame, Jas Mann and Malkit Singh, Punjabi music has become a big industry in Britain,' says Malkit Singh, warming for his concert at the Ritz in Manchester in the biting cold of November.

Bhangra became hep and western when Malkit arrived in Birmingham in 1984. 'We improvised and blended bhangra with western tunes. It was a BIG hit.'

His *Tootak Tootak* became the highest selling Punjabi album in the '90s. And it is still selling. 'Our aim is to carry bhangra to the top of the UK charts,' he says.

Bally Sagoo is the new-age guru of bhangra.

A former salesman at a Tandy shop in Birmingham, Bally joined hands with Malkit Singh 'to make bhangra funkier.'

Launching his career with a hit re-mix of Malkit Singh's *Tootak Tootak*, Sagoo went on to become a producer. Oriental Star Agencies hired him to do an album. His *Rising From the East* made it to the UK charts.

Sagoo's *Dil Cheez* and *Tum Bin Jiya* were the first Indian language tracks to enter the Top-40 in Britain.

A full-fledged music director, Sagoo owns the state-of-the-art Currywood Studios in Birmingham and Ishq Records Company.

Avtar Lit in his Sunrise Radio studio (below) and with Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife Cherie Blair (right).



Media £60m  
**26=** 50

AVATAR Lit started his broadcasting career with a tiny pirate radio station in west London in the early 80s. After years of dodging the authorities he was eventually granted a licence to say

He went to Bollywood in the early '90s to re-mix the songs of the late music director R.D. Burman. He also did music for the Hindi film *Kartoos*.

'Sagoo is a role model for our kids. Every youngster wants to be like him,' says Arun Bajaj of Radio XL in Birmingham.

Yet another Birmingham-based Sikh singer, Jas Mann, became the first Indian to break into the UK charts with his solo English number Spaceman in the mid-1990s.

Talvin Singh is the renaissance man of eastern music. He is rated as one of the most exciting percussionists in recent times. Talvin's music crosses cultures, ethnic boundaries and languages. Tabla, sitar, guitar, gong, drum, keys, percussion and piano are his world. By fusing his training in classical tabla and percussion with electronic music, Talvin has sired a new hybrid of bhangra and drum 'n' bass.

Accompanied by vocalists and musicians, he starts off "innocently enough, soft and lulling" only to suck you into a riotous crescendo.

The highly talented East London-born Talvin first heard the sound of tabla in a gurdwara. At the age of five, he was already playing it with élan. To sharpen his skills, he spent two and a half years in India with Lashman Singh of Punjab gharana.

Back home, he hit the big time by collaborating with Zen Cosmic Space, Jazz Guru, and Sun Ra in the early '90s.

He has also lent his tabla-tronics skills to Massive Attack, Courtney Pine, Bjork and Bim Sherman. In 1996, he launched Omni Records and released Calcutta Cyber Cafe's *Drum & Space* album followed by *Talvin Singh Presents Anokha: Soundz Of The Asian Underground*.

His 1998 release *O.K.* captures the experiences of a world in transition between identities, cultures, destinations and languages.

*Apna* very ethnic Talvin Singh has the West under his spell.

And *apna* Avtar Lit rules the airwaves... Sunrise Radio. Sunrise House. Sunrise Road. That's the Southall address of this self-made first-generation Sikh.

Owner of the largest Asian commercial radio in the world, Lit, whose worth is put at 60 million pounds, is one of the richest Asians in Britain.

When he landed in England in 1962, Lit could barely speak English. He entered the Royal Navy College at Chatham, but as things were not to his liking he ran away to Birmingham.

Young Lit worked in factories, drove cabs and made videos before he entered broadcasting by taking over SINA radio catering to the Asians of Southall.

Lit, with his business partners, launched Sunrise Radio in the 1990s.

Today, Sunrise Radio broadcasts twenty-four hours. The enterprising Lit has extended his empire to Mauritius and Sri Lanka.



## University of Brighton



(Top left): London-based banker Pritpal Singh Chawla with Dr Manmohan Singh.

(Top right): Prof Karamjit Singh Gill, who teaches information technology at the University of Brighton, is also co-ordinating the European Union-India Network for Cross Cultural Collaboration.

(Left): Prof Gurharpal Singh of the University of Hull with Lord Bhiku Parekh.

(Above): Simon Singh is a man of many parts.

An honorary Ph.D. from Thames Valley University, Lit heads the Asian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that owns Hiru, Tharu and Sun FM stations. His future address, he says, is politics. Towards this end, he unsuccessfully contested against Piara Singh Khabra in Ealing-Southall in the 2001 general elections.

The Sikhs started making their mark in the field of education as early as the '60s and '70s.

Prof Kuldeep Singh Virdi taught at the School of Engineering at City University, London, in the 1980s and 1990s.

By the end of 2002, many Punjabis were teaching in British universities, including Dr Ajit Singh at Queen's College in Cambridge, Dr Shinder Thandi at Coventry, Dr Pritam Singh at Oxford, Prof Gurharpal Singh at the University of Hull, Meena Dhanda at Wolverhampton University, Varinder Singh at Leicester University, Mrs N Purewal at Manchester and Dalbir Singh Koshal at the University of Brighton.

'Prof Ajit Singh was one of the first Sikhs to hold a position in any British university. He is a pioneer in the field of economics and development studies at the international level,' says Prof Karamjit Singh Gill who teaches information technology at the University of Brighton. A D.Phil in Applied Sciences from the University of Sussex, Prof Gill is currently co-ordinating the on-going European Union-India Network for Cross Cultural Collaboration.

'Under this project, we aim to create a network of postgraduate, doctoral and post-doctoral researchers to facilitate collaboration between the universities, enterprises and stakeholders,' says Prof Gill, who is the founding editor of AI & Society and the Series Editor for the Human Centered Systems Society Book Series.

Author-broadcaster 'Dr' Simon Singh is a multi-faceted personality. An ambassador for ActionAid, he is a doctorate in particle science, author of two books — Fermat's Last Theorem and The Code Book — and a journalist whose objective is to 'communicate science' via TV and radio. Singh, who worked as a producer and director with BBC's science unit for six years, does lots of radio talks on science and contributes to newspapers and magazines.

A second-generation Sikh, Simon Singh's father came to Britain in 1938. The family moved to Wellington in 1951 where he was born. 'The science bug bit me very early in life. As a kid, Carl Sagan and Heinz Wolf were my role models,' he says.

In banking, Pritpal Singh Chawla has risen as high as one can. A self-made man, the septuagenarian Chawla is perhaps the only person to have risen from the post of a peon to head a bank. 'Not one, but two international banks,' gushes Chawla.

Chawla and his family landed virtual paupers in Delhi from Pakistan in 1947. 'Our misery was compounded by the fact that we lost our bank draft for Rs 5,000 on the way. We sold milk and jute sacks to survive,' he recalls.

Young Chawla started his career as a peon with the Central Bank of India. Through hard work and diligence, he slowly made his way up. From the Central Bank of India, he moved to Punjab & Sind Bank that sent him to London in 1979 to turn around its country branch.



In his younger days, London-based Balwant Kapoor (right) of the Indian Overseas Congress interviewed Yuri Gagarin when he returned from space.

Chawla fostered close ties with businessmen, and the bank grew from strength to strength.

From Punjab & Sind Bank, he went to head the Middle East Bank in Nairobi. ‘I held this post for six years, and had the rare privilege of being given a Guard of Honour in Karachi,’ laughs Chawla, sitting in his study at his Sudbury Court Estate residence in North Wembley.

After the Nairobi stint, Chawla went on to head the Delphis Bank of Mauritius. Then, he was appointed executive chairman of the Pan-African Bank in Kenya. ‘But unfortunately, the bank was placed under moratorium before I took over,’ he says.

Chawla serves on the boards of the Sikh Missionary Society, the Sikh Forum, the Pothohar Association, the Guru Nanak Foundation and the International Punjabi Society.

A great raconteur, he is well versed with the history of Delhi’s major spots such as Coffee House and Rashtrapati Bhavan. Reclining on the sofa, he says, ‘I am happy to have played a nice innings. There is no other person of Indian origin in banking who has risen from bottom to the top.’

Another great raconteur is Balwant Singh Kapoor of Hounslow. A close friend of the late Punjab chief minister Partap Singh Kairon, Kapoor was his jail mate in Multan in 1942. ‘Kairon was my mentor. Through him, I grew closer to Pandit Nehru,’ says Kapoor who has lived in England since 1978.

Nehru sent him to Poland as India’s ambassador in 1960. ‘I was one of the first turbaned Sikhs to serve in the West, and I was in Warsaw for two years.’

Kapoor is a man of many parts. In the ’50s and ’60s, he contributed to the *Sunday Express* and the *Sunday Telegraph* of London. ‘I was sent by BBC to Moscow and I was the first journalist to interview Yuri Gagarin when he landed back on earth from the moon. I got loads of money for that interview,’ he laughs.

When the violence in Punjab in the 1980s cast its shadow on Britain, he launched *Sher-e-Punjab* newspaper to counter anti-India propaganda. A patriot to the core, Kapoor still brings out two magazines on India — on Republic Day and Independence Day.

A member of the managing committee of the prestigious Indian Gymkhana in Hounslow, Kapoor says, ‘It is a top sports club in Britain today and is worth more than fifty million pounds. When Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala came to London for the coronation of Queen Victoria, he bought the Gymkhana and the Shepherd’s Bush gurdwara for the Indian community.’

Kapoor adds, ‘You know who started the first Indian grocery shop in England? Two Sikhs opened the Grewal-Bassi Store on Petticoat Street in East London in the early part of the twentieth century. It is still doing business.’

Talking about business, the Sikhs have left their imprint in garments, jewellery, electronics, insurance, real estate, dairy, transport, food and oils, and hotels.

As if on cue from the Chinese living overseas, Sikh businesses have flourished through close-knit family ties.



East End Foods' Tony Deep Wouhra with former Speaker of the House of Commons Betty Boothroyd.

Wouhra brothers, who run East End Foods, are a prime example of a close-knit business family. Jointly, the five brothers run one of the biggest food chains in Britain.

The Wouhra saga began in 1960 when Kuldip Singh (Tony Deep) Wouhra landed in London as a seventeen-year-old lad.

'I wanted to become a film director. Some friends advised me to go to Britain, make money and return,' recalls the managing director of East End Foods.

He never returned.

Tony narrates how he spent his first night in London. 'I landed at Heathrow with three pounds in my pocket. A friend who was to pick me up failed to show up. In desperation I knocked at a few doors in Alexander Enclave for shelter. Finally, a Punjabi family let me in,' says Tony.

'On that day I realized why Punjabi hospitality is unmatched. Five days later, my friend turned up to take me home. On my eleventh day, I found work. My first job involved mixing sand with cement.'

Later, Tony worked on the railways and studied part-time in a polytechnic. It was at this polytechnic that he met his future wife and found his future calling. 'That young English woman (later my wife) sent me to her aunt, hoping that the old lady will help me find a job. When the old woman asked who gave me her address, I said I have been knocking at doors for a job. She said she was an artist and did sculptures. Then she said: "My husband has given me 1,200 hens that lay 800 eggs". I asked what she did with these eggs. She said: "Damn it, I want to sell them". I said: "You want me to sell them" She said: "Yes. I thought you are looking for a job".'

So, young Wouhra sold eggs part-time. 'I used to go around, shouting loudly: Behnji *ande le lavo* (anybody wants eggs)?'

Soon he was selling eggs wholesale. As his business grew, Tony called his brother from Delhi to start canning of chicken and beans.

In 1967, he branched into groceries and prospered. 'We kept adding whatever people demanded. So here we are today. East End Foods is named after East End of London (which is associated with the East India dock where cargo is unloaded). We import cereals, spices and rice under the East End brand. Our basmati rice is in great demand in Britain, Germany, Sweden and North America.'

With daily sales of more than two hundred tonnes and an annual turnover of a hundred million pounds in 2002, the Wouhra brothers have entered yet another area: processing and distributing foodstuffs.

Interestingly, Tony Wouhra also directed a semi-autobiographical fifty-two-episode serial called *Family Pride* that was telecast on Doordarshan and Star.

'I started this venture with a view to establishing Asians on the British screen. The shooting was done in Britain,' says Tony Wouhra.



One of the fastest rising Sikh businessmen, Mohinder Singh Kohli.

Laying bare his success formula, he says, 'When you get going, a plan is necessary. It shortens the struggle period. Integrity is essential. If you are dishonest, no financial institution will stand by you. Believe in hard work and have foresight.'

His neighbour, Mohinder Singh Kohli, is in accord with this view.

A self-made multi-millionaire, Kohli landed in Britain from Kapurthala in 1967 with just a few pounds in his pocket. Starting off as a welder with a weekly salary of 12.14 pounds in 1968, this intense man today heads one of the hundred fastest growing companies and lives in the ten-acre Melbourne House, the biggest and probably the oldest royal property in Walsall.

'The mansion belonged to the Royals. Like Melbourne House in Walsall, there is a Walsall House in Melbourne. When I bought it in 1991, I unearthed newspapers dating back to 1768.'

Kohli did the welder's job for a year before he went into jewellery imports.

In 1973-74, he branched into electronics trade. His company, Stonegalleon Ltd, entered Fast Track's Top-100 list in 2000. 'Fast Track picked us on the basis of growth, profits and potential.'

He sells his goods under five brands: Handy Helper, Sketch, Ralph, MSK and Satin. 'We deal in more than five thousand items, including fancy goods, stationery, hardware, hand tools and electronic goods,' he says.

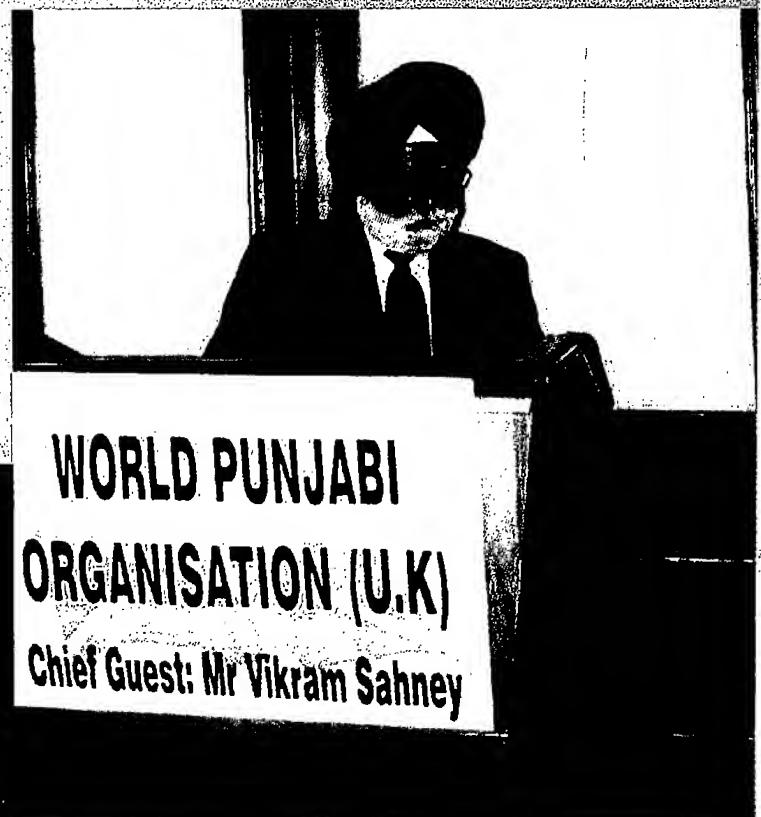
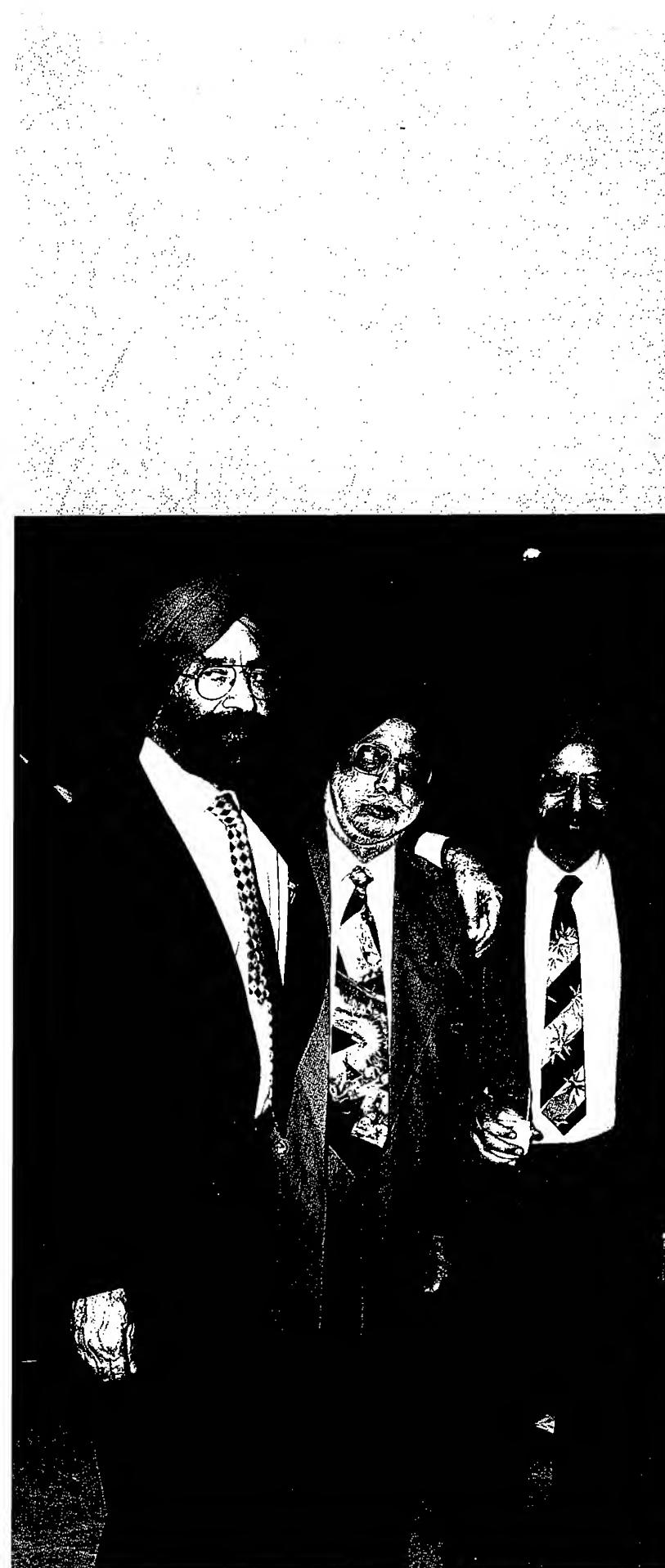
With offices in Hong Kong, Canada, India and the US, Stonegalleon imports items from more than fifty countries, including China, India and Pakistan, and markets them in Europe and North America. About his business volume, Kohli says, 'We imported more than two thousand containers in the year 2001.'

Kohli's daughter, Harinder, is the first Indian woman to become a barrister in Britain.

KTC or the Khaira Trading Company is another famous brand in the Midlands. It is on TV, in papers and on trailers. With pride in his voice, Kohli says, 'The Khaira brothers, who own the KTC edible oil brand, come from my village.'

With an annual turnover of over fifty million pounds in 2002, KTC is one of the biggest groups in packaging and wholesale supply of edibles in Britain. 'We buy refined edible oils — corn oil, vegetable oil, soyabean, mustard — in bulk, package it and sell it to food chains and supermarkets,' says group managing director Santokh Singh Khaira.

KTC's monthly outgo from its sprawling factory in Wednesbury is thousands of tonnes. 'We supply all over England and the Middle East,' adds Khaira, whose father came to England in 1951 to start a garments business. In 1962, the Khairas started the grocery business. Later, they branched into edible oils. 'To this day, we are the only Sikh family in this trade in Britain,' he says.



(Above): A P S Chawla owns the fashion house Nova of London.

(Left): Gurdip Singh Gujral (in blue turban), who is the second highest decorated Sikh in Britain, with P S Chawla (centre) and Asian Who's Who editor Jasbir Sachar.

Ajinderpal Singh Chawla of Nova of London is also one of his kind in women's fashion garments. A self-made man, he too landed in Britain in 1965 with just 1.5 pounds in his pocket.

Standing next to Queen's College in Cambridge, Chawla points to a group of pavement dealers and says, 'I was one of them in 1973. I was the only turbaned guy in Cambridge in those days. Curious women from nearby villages used to ask me questions about the turban. They thought I knew no English and used sign language. But when I replied in English, they would laugh.'

In 1977, he entered the wholesale business. In 1980, he moved his operations to London. Today, he imports knitted wear from China, Taiwan and Korea and also manufactures it in Leicester.

For his social service, Chawla was awarded 'Freeman of the City of London' in the year 2000.

In his native Punjab, he has set up a therapy wing at the Shri Guru Ramdas Rotary Cancer Hospital, Amritsar, under the aegis of his Movement to Kill Cancer (MKC) Trust in memory of his wife.

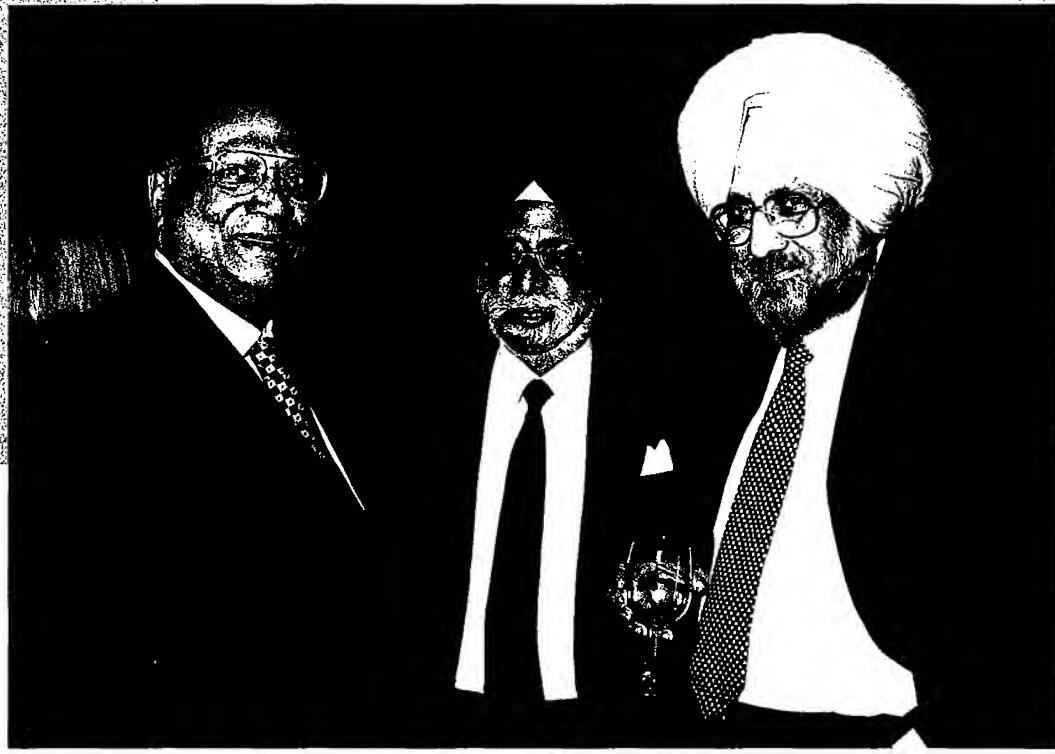
Gurdip Singh Gujral of the International Punjabi Society is a highly decorated Sikh in Britain. A Patiala lad, who in 1965 quit his 150-rupee-a-month job in search of a quick buck in England, has come a long way. 'I wanted to return and set up a factory in my native town, but it didn't happen,' he says between sips of tea in his office on Gorst Road in London.

Gujral imports garments worth millions of pounds annually from India. With a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) under his belt, Gujral is the second highest decorated Punjabi in the UK. 'I am eyeing a Lordship now,' he laughs.

The International Punjabi Society, says Gujral, has done a commendable job of promoting brotherhood among the Punjabi diaspora. 'We have branches all over the world and we meet annually to chalk out future plans,' he adds.

Gujral's list of well-heeled Sikhs includes M.S. Anand of Leicester, who, he says, is one of the biggest financiers. 'In the hotel business, the Vohras are well known. M. S. Chadha is a known name in industrial estate. Gurbachan Singh Gill was among the first few Sikhs to come to England in the early '50s.'

*Asian Who's Who* editor Jasbir Sachar, who came to London from Bareilly and hopped from one job to another, has given a collective identity to the Asian community by bringing out the publication. 'When I came here in the late '70s, the Asians had two bodies — the Asian Welfare Association and the Asian Cultural Association — whose membership overlapped. We decided to merge these to form the Asian Welfare and Cultural Association. I was selected its first secretary. We used to go on picnics and discuss issues of immigration and racial discrimination. We would celebrate Diwali and hold functions. To foster bonds, we thought about launching *Asian Who's Who*.



(Top): Lord Swraj Paul with Inder Singh Uppal and P S. Chawla (centre).

(Above): Piara Singh Khabra, the first Indian to become an MP in Britain in 1992, at the mike.

'At the time, racists were targeting the Asians. We were called Pakis. To counter the racist propaganda, we collected data about the Asian community to develop its collective profile and present it to the British public and officials. Suddenly, a lot was being written about us in the newspapers.'

Every year, the publication selects an Asian of the Year for his or her contribution in any walk of life. The past winners include Swraj Paul and Imran Khan. 'Our higher profile has helped us have more say in the decision-making process,' says Sachar.

London-based Inder Singh Uppal has served on the Metropolitan Police Committee that seeks greater representation for the minorities in the police. 'The London police are under the control of the Metropolitan Committee. The commissioner listens to what its members say,' says Uppal who was awarded the MBE in 1984.

A British resident since 1962, Uppal has played a leading role in the campaign for the rights of the minorities in Britain. Thanks to this campaign, many turbaned Sikhs serve in the police. 'London's Metropolitan Police Service currently employs many turbaned Sikh police officers,' says Kashmira Singh Mann, chairperson of the Metropolitan Police Sikh Association. Mann is with New Scotland Yard.

Another Sikh who has worked tirelessly for promoting racial understanding and been awarded the MBE is Hounslow-based Ajit Singh.

British Sikhs have done well at the local level politics. 'But we need to enhance our presence at the higher level to safeguard our future,' says Ealing Southall MP, Piara Singh Khabra, who in 1992 became the first Sikh to enter the House of Commons.

'Though Keith Vaz, another MP of Indian origin, was elected before me, I am a real Indian. I was born in Hoshiarpur, while Keith was born in Aden, Yemen,' says Khabra with a chuckle.

A leftist during his college days, Khabra originally wanted to go to the US. 'I did my MA in political science from Panjab University where Dr Manmohan Singh was my contemporary. Though I had a teacher's job, I wanted to explore the world. But I couldn't get the US visa because of my left background. So I got stuck in London,' he laughs.

On landing in Britain in 1959, Khabra immediately joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (which he left in 1965 to join the Labour Party). He did odd jobs for two years before becoming a "supply teacher" to stand in for those on leave. After completing his retraining course, he secured a teacher's job.

On the side, Khabra continued to be involved in community work and the Indian Workers' Association. This work fetched him a term as a councillor for Southall. He served as secretary of the Indian Workers' Association in 1963 and 1977. In 1979, he was made the IWA chairman — a position he still holds.

'I got elected as an MP from Ealing Southall in 1992 by a majority of 7,000 votes which swelled to 22,000 in the 1997 elections. I have just won once again,' gushes Khabra.

(Right) Young MP Parmjit Dhanda near the House of Commons.

(Below) Dhanda with colleagues



To begin with, Southall was a railway town that attracted immigrants from Wales and Ireland to work in the factories along the line. In the 1950s, Asians were hired by rubber-plastic factories that could not find local labour. That's how the Asian population of the town swelled. Earlier, this area elected Tory MPs. But with the change in its demography, it became a Labour stronghold. Today, Ealing Southall is the safest seat for the Labour Party.

Khabra has been the biggest beneficiary of the change in Southall's demography.

In the House of Commons, Khabra has raised his voice against racism.

He played a major role in getting the Race Relations Act passed. The act commits the British Government to eliminating racism.

'Racism is still a fact of life here as British society is based on class distinctions. But racism is on its way out, and Britain today is a multi-cultural society,' says Khabra. He has served as a member of the International Development Committee that oversees aid to Third World countries.

Khabra supports India on its nuclear programme. 'In the Commons, I spoke in favour of India on the Kashmir issue and nuclear weapons. And why should India sign the CTBT when others don't? It is a major power in the region,' he says.

Corruption and political immorality in India, he bemoans, are a matter of concern. By way of a solution, he recommends that only grassroots workers should choose candidates, not the so-called party high commands. 'It is demeaning to go begging for tickets,' says the MP who gets 46,000 pounds as annual salary and another 46,000 pounds as office expenses, and 10,000 pounds as car allowance.

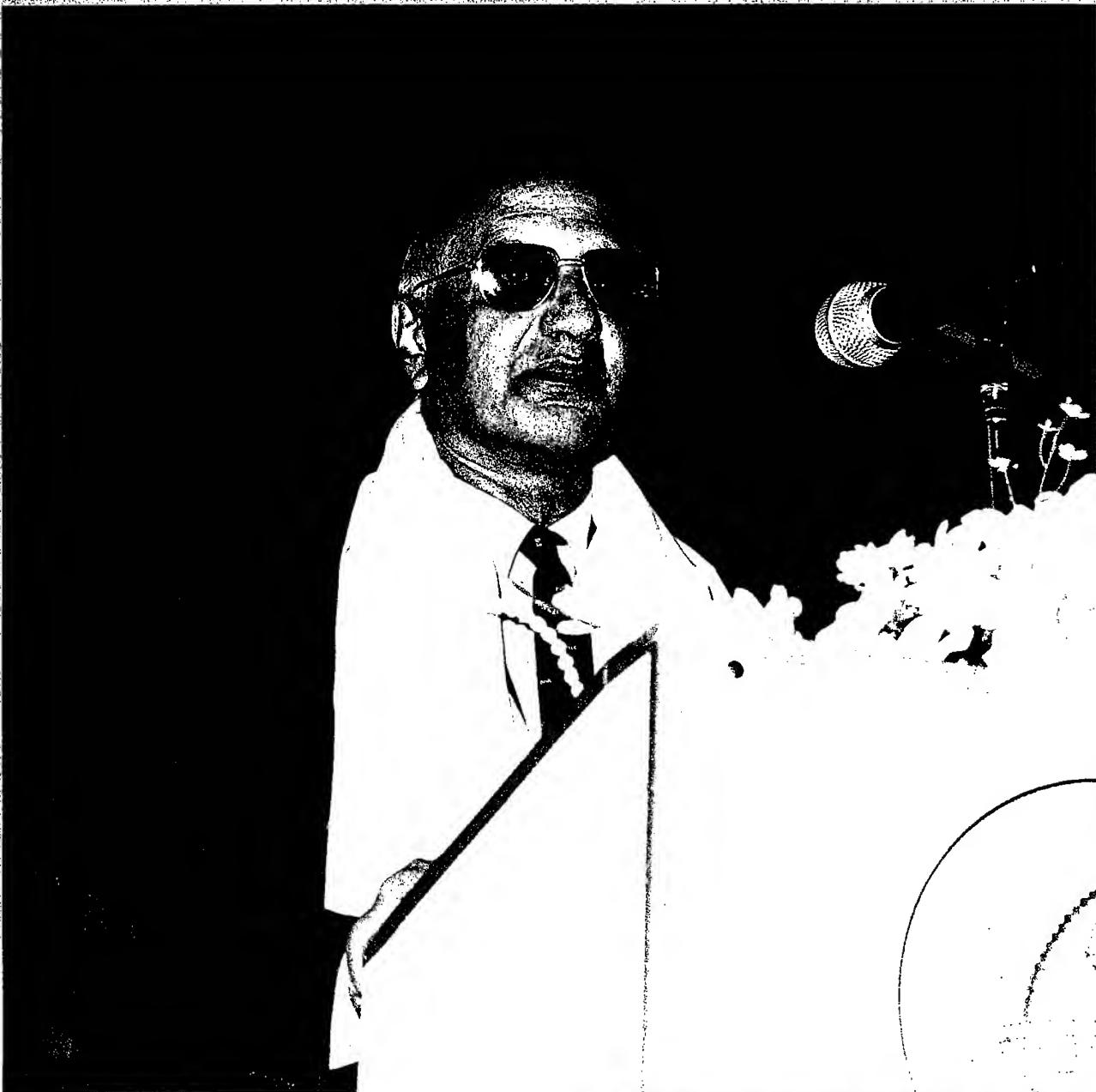
In June 2001, yet another Sikh, Parmjit Dhanda, entered the House of Commons from Gloucester. 'I was one of the youngest candidates in that election,' says Dhanda, who won by a margin of four thousand votes.

Born in Southall in London in 1971, Dhanda is the first British-born Sikh to hold the highest elective post in the country. 'Southall was not one of the richer places in Britain. When you grow up in that sort of environment, you look for alternatives to change your world. You work incredibly hard. I got interested in politics at a very young age. It was a channel for me to change my world,' says young Dhanda, whose family moved to Britain from Dhanda village near Jalandhar in the early 1960s.

Like any immigrant family, the Dhandas too went through the grind. 'My mum was a cleaner in a hospital. Dad worked as a lorry driver. It was tough financially.'

He attended Mellow Lane Comprehensive School and then studied engineering at Nottingham University where he finished B.Engg and M.Sc. in Information Technology.

'A year after leaving university, I was appointed as one of the Labour Party's organisers. In 1998, I went on to work for Connect — the union for professionals in communications — where I became Assistant National Organizer,' he says.



(Above): Tarsem King is the first Sikh to become a Lord in Britain.

(Right): Avtarjeet Dhanjal, who is a well-known sculptor based in the Midlands, has brought artists from India and Britain together through exchange programmes.



Dhanda started his political apprenticeship at the age of seventeen by joining the Labour Party in 1987. ‘Back then my work involved volunteering and campaigning in the London borough of Ealing. In 1998, I successfully contested as a councillor for the London borough of Hillingdon. Next year, I was one of the youngest candidates to contest the European parliamentary elections,’ says Dhanda.

In the June 2001 general elections, he went on to win the Gloucester parliamentary seat by a margin of four thousand.

‘The Sikhs have come a long way in Britain. There are lots of areas where we have done very well. Many Sikhs hold mayoral posts, which is nice from the ceremonial point of view. If we are serious about change, we have to be present at the higher levels of decision-making,’ he says.

What does his Sikh identity mean to him? ‘It has shaped me as an individual. It says who I am as an individual,’ says Dhanda, who is an avid football and rugby fan.

Marsha Singh, who represents West Bradford, is yet another Sikh MP in the House of Commons.

In June 1999, Tarsem King became the first Sikh Lord. ‘I am flattered to be put forward by my colleagues and local people — particularly our four local MPs and MPs from outside the borough who helped nominate me and I hope I will repay their trust in the work I do,’ King said on his appointment.

Born in 1937 in Punjab, King went to England in 1960. He worked in foundry units before training as a teacher. Later, he set up his packaging business.

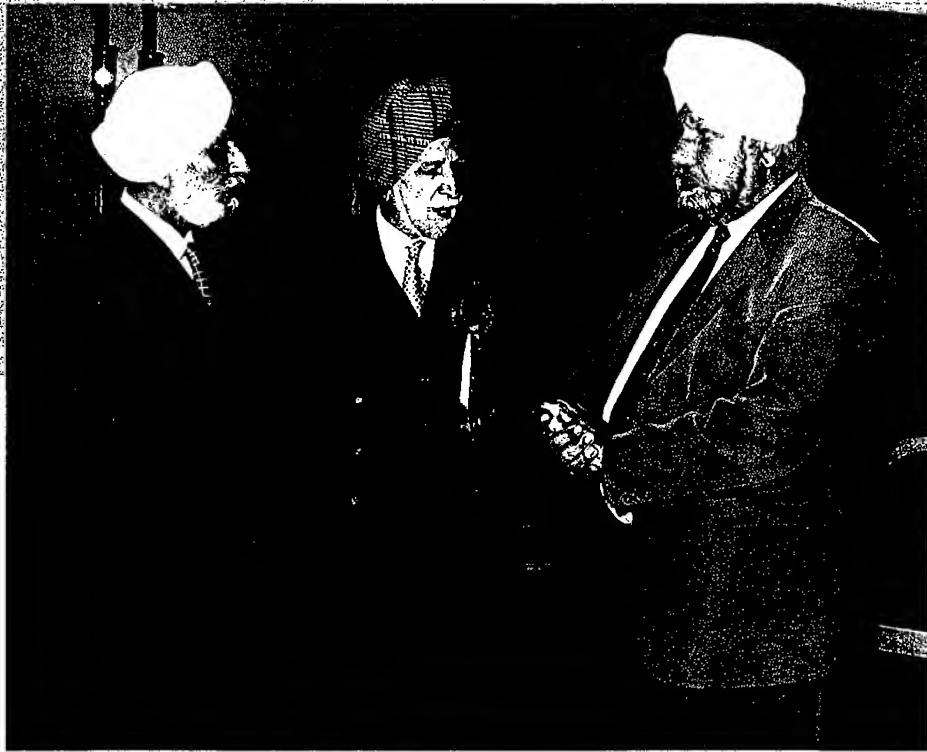
King worked tirelessly towards developing services for the elderly and promoting religious and racial harmony in the multi-racial Sandwell community.

‘This has been my country for forty years and now I am glad to say it has adopted me and it was the people of Sandwell who first gave me the chance to start on the political ladder. I will never forget that. I consider this an honour for Sandwell and it is quite an honour for the Sikh community too, for me to go to the House of Lords — however, it is important that I am representing the whole community,’ he said.

A man with a vast grassroots experience, Tarsem King was first elected to the Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council in 1979 where he served for twenty years. He became the first Indian to lead the Sandwell Council in 1997.

Judge Mota Singh stands out for his accomplishments.

This mild-mannered Sikh created history in 1979 by becoming the Queen’s first Asian/Sikh judge. When he created ripples in the three hundred-year-old history of British law by adoring a turban (in place of a wig), the newspapers hailed this shy, suave gentleman. ‘It is only fair to add that Mr Mota Singh is an exceptional man. With his crisply cultured voice and uncompromisingly old-fashioned standards of rectitude and decorum, he seems almost to have been destined by birth and upbringing to occupy the high position he holds,’ wrote the *Sunday Telegraph* of 14 October 1979.



Britain's first Asian judge Mota Singh (left) with Lt. Gen Jagjit Singh Aurora (centre).



Sikh Forum president Ranjit Singh with former Indian High Commissioner in London Lalit Mansingh.

He still holds the Crown court. Born in Kenya, Mota Singh studied law in Britain from 1954 to 1956. Back home, he held many high-profile positions, including Alderman of the Nairobi City Council. In 1961, Mota Singh became the first Sikh MP in the East African country. In 1965, he landed in London.

Driving past the Wimbledon Stadium on his way home, he says, 'There were difficulties in the beginning as I was one of the first few Asians to go to bar. But my clients were Whites. The judges liked my work.'

While it took others sixteen years, Mota Singh became the Queen's Counsel after just ten years' practice. 'That was in 1978.'

Four years on, Mota Singh was a judge! 'I was 52 at that time. In between, the British government appointed me to the Race Relations Board.'

A pious man, Mota Singh lives next to the beautiful Wimbledon tennis courts and devotes a considerable amount of time to community activities.

'Hon'ble Mota Singh is one of the most respected Sikhs in Britain. We are richer for his contribution,' says Ranjit Singh of the Sikh Forum.

Sikh Forum's British branch was set up by Lt-Gen Jagjit Singh Aurora in 1985 to raise funds for the 1984 riot victims. Thanks to Ranjit Singh's efforts, the community has not only collected huge amounts of funds, but also raised awareness about itself among the British.

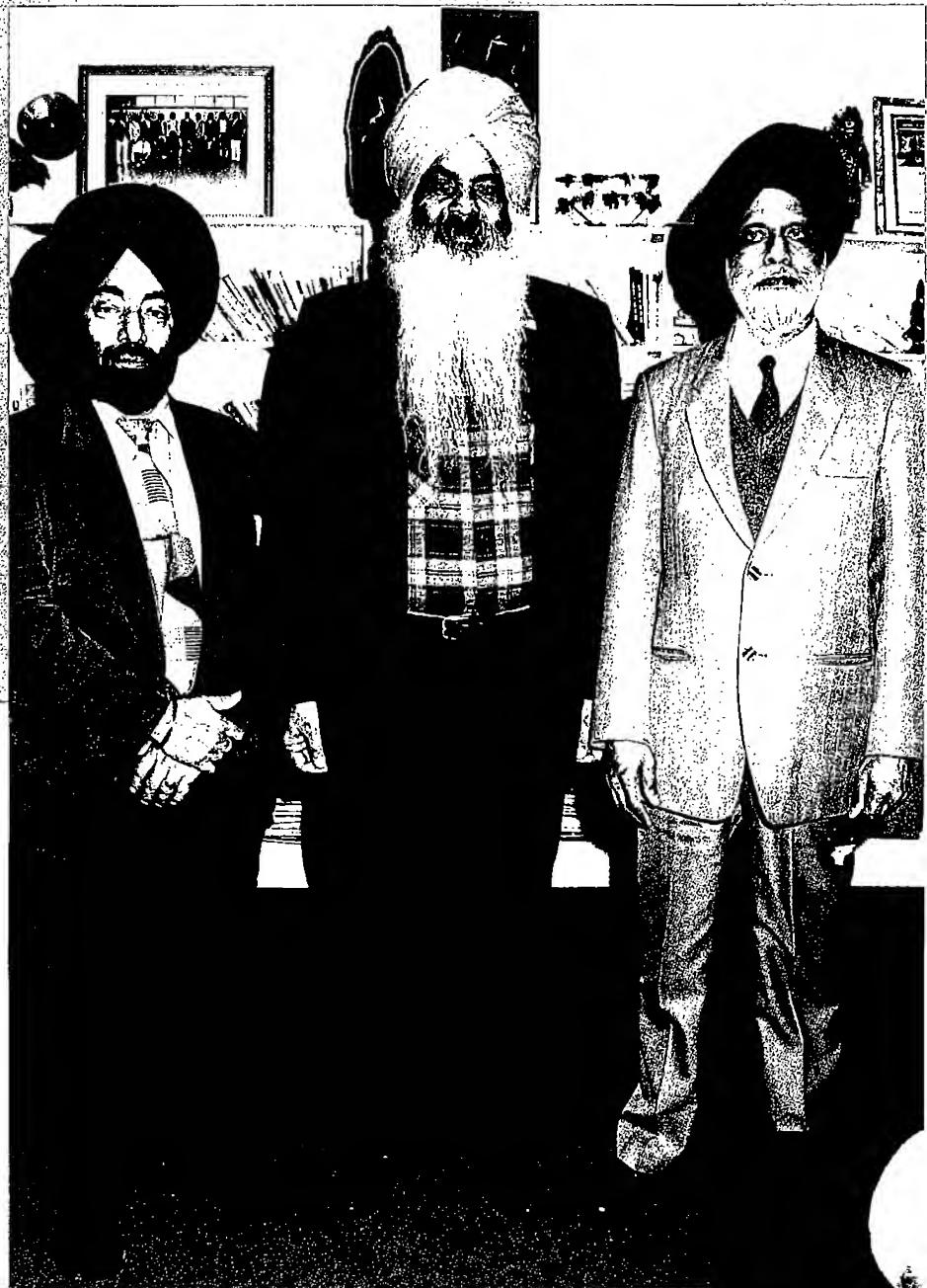
Ranjit Singh, who moved to Britain in 1963 and runs a construction business, says, 'We raised funds for seven to eight years for the 1984 riot victims and looked after about a hundred children. The Forum has hundreds of members. We bring out a souvenir and organize functions to discuss the issues facing the community. We have consistently raised the issue of the riot victims and the harassment of innocent Punjabis at airports in India with the Indian High Commissioner and the British government.'

In the '90s, Ranjit Singh helped raise a hundred thousand pounds for setting up a Guru Nanak Chair at a British University. 'But the idea is yet to take shape. Prof Wariam Singh of Edinburgh in Scotland, who was an ENT expert, was about to move to the University of Aberdeen to start the Chair when he died suddenly. The money is still lying with us, and we are thinking about other options,' says Ranjit Singh, sitting in his Station Road office in East London.

The Indians, and Sikhs in particular, have contributed to altering the food habits of the British, says Tony Wouhra of East End Foods.

'Tandoori has become very popular because it has spices which send your taste buds racing. On the other hand, British food is very bland. All they do is cut meat and put it in oven. But today, special programmes on curry and tandoori are regularly telecast,' he says.

*Asian Who's Who* editor Jasbir Sachar adds, 'We are also credited with introducing the concept of keeping corner shops open till 11 p.m. When we came here, the White people would close shops at 5 p.m. But when our people kept their's open till 11 p.m., the White



(Above): G S Virk (right) edits Britain's largest Punjabi Paper Des Pardes.

(Right): The late Dr Preetam Singh was one of the first few Sikhs to become a barrister in England where the Lord General used to greet him with Sat Sri Akal. He was also the first coloured person in British history to be appointed Queen's Counsel in 1976.



shopkeepers had no choice. Previously, no White shopkeeper delivered goods at home. But when our shopkeepers started doing so, they followed suit.'

'Further, the council would discriminate against us in the allotment of houses. Our people started pooling their resources to buy houses. The Whites also picked up this habit. Today, they too take pride in owning a house.'

Having accomplished so much in all walks of life, where do the Sikhs of Britain go from here?

Put simply, they feel they are at a crossroads. Materially, they have done well. But not socially and racially. Subtle discrimination, they say, continues and will continue despite the avowed commitment of political parties to make Britain a 'truly multi-racial society.'

Speaking about intra-community problems, the tercentenary celebrations across Britain and a special exhibition helped heighten the Sikhs' sense of identity. 'Not only the elders, but also the children now take pride in their heritage,' says G.S. Virk, editor of *Des Pardes*, the premier newspaper of the Punjabis in Europe. 'Our endeavour is to enlighten the Sikhs about their past. We sell over 45,000 copies per week, and every issue carries a special supplement,' says the mild-mannered Virk.

Starting from 1960, the late Amar Singh Chatwal edited the *Sikh Courier* for four decades. A former civil servant, Chatwal had organized the first-ever mass baptism ceremony in London in 1965 and was instrumental in bringing many Whites into the Sikh fold. He distributed the *Sikh Courier* free to non-Sikhs and institutions. Interestingly, an English woman, Mrs Wylamm, edited the *Courier* under the name of Manjit Kaur for many years. These days it is being edited by Dr Sukhbir Singh Kapoor.

On a sour note, British Sikhs are a heterogeneous, caste-ridden group. 'There is little social interaction among different sections. There are Jat gurdwaras. There are Ramgarhia gurdwaras. And there are Ramdasia gurdwaras. Not surprisingly, British-born, English-speaking Sikh boys and girls are a confused lot,' says Amrita Cheema, who did her Ph.D. in England on the topic of 'Punjab under Unionist Party rule' in the 1930s. Amen.





# EUROPE:

## CONTINENTAL GAINS



hen young Punjabi artist Sohan Qadri from Phagwara landed in Copenhagen in 1968, there were only three dozen Indians in Denmark. ‘And not more than a hundred in the whole of Scandinavia. Young Danish girls used to touch my black hair, wondering how human hair could be black. A local newspaper carried an article titled *Black Eyes, Black Hair on me*,’ laughs Qadri, sitting in his studio in the heart of Copenhagen.

By 2002, there were more than five thousand Sikhs in Norway, Denmark and Sweden. Most of them reached Scandinavia in the early ’70s. In recent years, hundreds of Sikhs have reached Italy, Portugal, Belgium and Switzerland.

‘Twenty Indian families, including Sikhs, first came to Sweden from Uganda in 1972. Till then their population here was negligible. It increased substantially only in the early 1980s,’ says Vestras-based classical music artist Harvinder Singh, who came to Sweden in 1975.

Since the majority of immigrants were not qualified professionals, they had to rough it out in the initial days.

Mani Singh Rathode, one of the few turbaned Sikhs to reach Denmark in the early ’70s and who teaches Punjabi and Danish to the children of the new immigrants, says, ‘As in the US and Canada, we also had to fight many battles. When I was called for an interview for the post of a driver, I was told to remove my turban. I refused, citing it as an article of faith.’

In the end, Rathode won. He became the first turbaned Sikh to drive a state transport bus in Scandinavia.

What is the profile of the Sikh communities in these countries?

Norway has attracted professionals in recent times. 'There are many Sikh doctors and IT professionals in Oslo,' says Gurpreet Singh, a gynaecologist at the city's Riks Hospital.

In Sweden, most Sikhs run small businesses like transport and grocery shops. However, Harvinder Singh ranks among a handful of exponents of Indian and western classical music in the world.

A disciple of S.K. Datta, he has introduced Indian classical music at the College of Music and Fine Arts in Vestras where he is based and teaches part-time.

A roving artist, he also holds concerts and workshops and delivers lectures all over Europe. Harvinder Singh was the first non-European to be given Sweden's highest National Council of Arts award (worth 150,000 kroners) in 1998 when Stockholm was chosen as the Cultural Capital of the World for a year.

In Denmark, a couple of Sikhs have done remarkably well in science. Dr Suresh I.S. Rattan is called the guru of genes. He came to Denmark in 1984 and currently teaches at the Danish Center for Gerontology at the University of Arthus.

An authority on bio-gerontology — a science that deals with the biological aspect of ageing — Rattan is the first D.Sc. (a post doctorate qualification) in the subject in the world.

Rattan, who did his Ph.D. in London, was invited by the Danish authorities to set up the Centre for Gerontology in 1984. 'Though the social and psychological aspects of ageing have already been probed, I am the first to start research on probing the biological aspect,' says Rattan.

Citing many discoveries to his credit, he says, 'On the basis of my research, more than twenty-five cosmetic products are being sold in America.'

Rattan says, 'The ageing process cannot be reversed. But we can attain a healthy old age. Bio-gerontology is all about attaining this. We have made tremendous progress in our lab on this aspect of ageing and in the next ten years we expect some major breakthroughs in this field.'

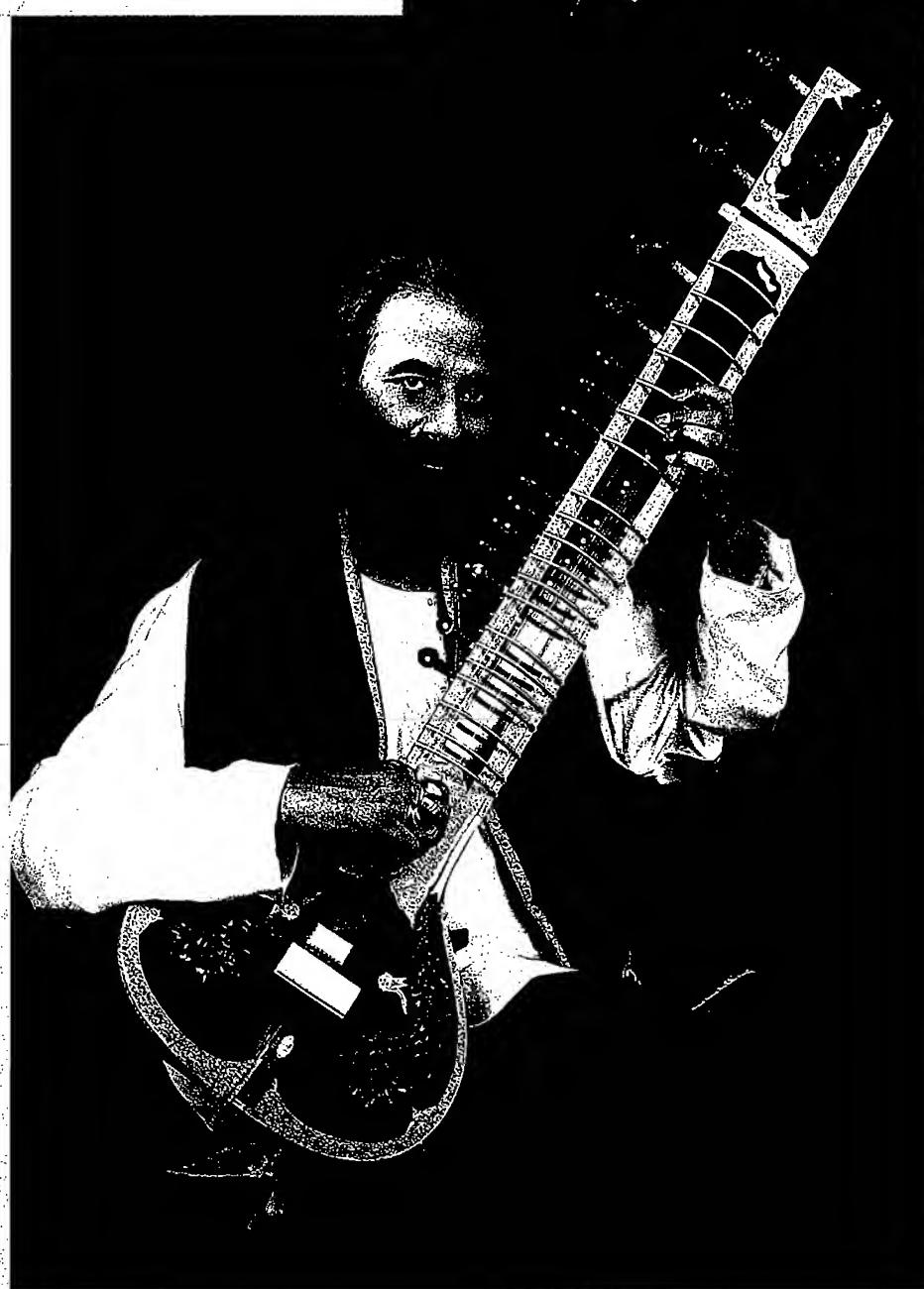
To bring his pioneering work to international audiences, Rattan, with twenty other eminent scientists from all over the world, has launched an international journal called *Bio-gerontology*. 'It is a big academic achievement,' beams the bearded scientist.

No less important is the work of another Sikh scientist, Dr Tara Singh Gahoonia, who is an associate professor at the Royal Veterinary and Agriculture University in Copenhagen.

If Rattan is the guru of genes, Dr Gahoonia is an expert in the field of plant nutrition.

'I am aiming at genetically creating such varieties of cereals as can be grown with less phosphate fertilizers. This work is on at many places in the world. When the breakthrough comes, the cereal crisis in Africa and other parts of the world will hopefully be over and the risk of famines reduced. As you know, phosphate deposits will not last beyond the middle of this century. So we have to create those varieties of cereals which can grow and give more grains with the addition of less phosphate fertilizers,' says Gahoonia, who did his M.Sc. in

Sweden-based famous sitarist  
Harvinder Singh (below) straddles  
two worlds—East and West.



Czechoslovakia, now Czech Republic, and Ph.D. in Germany before coming to Denmark in 1989.

Well-known Punjabi poet Shamsher Singh Sher is the grandpa of Indians in Denmark. Author of ten books, he is the oldest among Indians living in the Danish capital. Though he has lived in Denmark since 1972, India is still *mera wattan* for him. ‘Every year, I spend about four to five months in Delhi. Denmark is still a foreign land for me,’ he says, quoting some lines from one of his poems:

*Ik pardesi des parai,  
Eh gal keh ke rove,  
Harh ave koyee duniya ute pardesi naa hove,  
Des parai dee har gal hai  
Sade layee bedangi,  
Ena mast bahaaron kolon  
Ghar di patjhhar changi  
Ethon da har har phul bhee  
Sanu kande paya chobove  
Harh ave koyee duniya ute pardesi naa hove*

Currently, director of Radio Sab Rang that caters to Indians in Denmark, Sher is the first Indian poet whose works have been translated into Danish. He also heads the International Punjabi Cultural Foundation and the Indian Arts Promotion Council.

In the early ’70s, he launched a magazine called *Aman*.

‘My biggest achievement is the translation of Japji Sahib into Danish. With this, my mission in life is complete,’ he says.

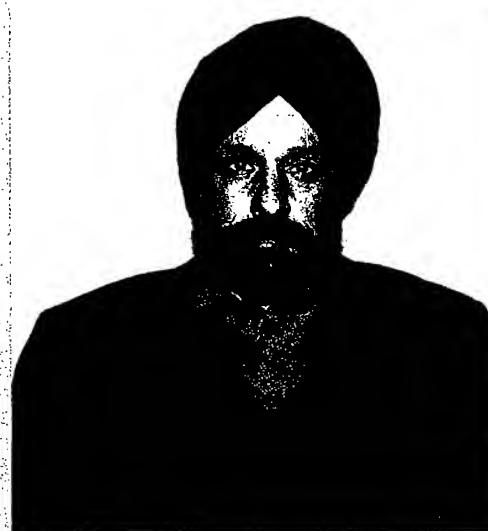
Interestingly, the Sikhs have made their entry into the Danish civil service as well.

The credit for breaking this barrier goes to Rashpal Singh Kalsi — who probably is the only Sikh in Europe to have entered the civil service in his adopted country. ‘Maybe, I am the only Punjabi in Europe to have accomplished this,’ he beams.

Living in the posh Albertslund area of Copenhagen, Kalsi recalls his initial struggle to come to terms with the new culture. ‘I moved to Copenhagen from New Delhi in 1970. It was tough in those days. Now we cannot think of life elsewhere. My son Gobind Singh is doing medicine from Copenhagen Medical College. The other, Navdeep, after getting his degree in chemical engineering, is an analyst in New York,’ he says.

Since 1984, Kalsi has worked in the Danish ministry for foreign affairs and Danish missions in Bangladesh, Mozambique and Nicaragua.

The Danes seem to have developed a taste for Punjabi cuisine. Not surprisingly, there are scores of high-class Punjabi eating joints in Copenhagen. Sarjit Ahluwalia, affectionately known as Saba, of Copenhagen takes the cake.



(Top left): Rashpal Singh Kalsi claims he is the first Sikh civil servant in the whole of the European continent.

(Top right): Punjabi poet Shamsher Singh Sher has translated Japji Sahib into the Danish language.

(Centre left): Tejinder Kalra made his Double Diamond rice brand famous in Europe.

(Centre right): Dr. Suresh I S Rattan is called the guru of genes in Denmark.

(Left): Artist Sohan Qadri (right) was one of the first Indians to come to Scandinavia in the '60s. In this picture, Qadri is seen outside a cafe owned by Singh Bandhu's nephew Prabhjot Singh Sodhi (centre) and Manbir Singh.



He owns the famous Taj Mahal Restaurant in the heart of the city. The Taj has one of the best interiors in town, with its silver-studded chairs and tables. 'I have been in this business for more than twenty-five years and have had the privilege of hosting VVIPs like the Danish Queen. Only yesterday, the Danish prime minister dropped in,' says Saba.

His next-door neighbour is India Palace. Prabhjot Sodhi, who is a nephew of the famous Singh Bandhus, owns the trendy Cafe au Lait near the fashionable Walking Street in Copenhagen. Married to a Dane, he moved to Copenhagen in 1981 after spending eleven years in Germany.

Tejinder Kalra is a name to reckon with in business. He imports the famous Double Diamond and Double Elephant rice brands from India. He moved to Denmark from Norway in 1989. 'Back then, the other reason for the move was that being in Denmark, an EC country, one could do business with the whole of Europe. Every month we sold about three containers of Double Diamond in England, two in Norway and one in Germany. Every third person in Europe knows about our brand,' claims Kalra, who served in the Scandinavian airlines SAS before starting his own business.

Having played his innings in Scandinavia, Kalra shifted base to England in 2002.

Gurcharan Singh Deol is one of the few Indians to have done really well in the computer world. Deol quit his teacher's job in Delhi to come to Denmark in 1970. 'I wanted to make a lot of money.'

Artist Sohan Qadri owns an art gallery in the heart of Copenhagen. 'I was first invited by the Danish cultural ministry for an exhibition in 1968. The Danes are wonderful. I was fascinated by the country from day one. Though there was not much international art here at the time, I had big sales. I was signed for ten years by two famous galleries. I stayed back and set up my own gallery in 1972. Today, I have representative galleries in Finland, Paris, London, Vienna, Stockholm, Oslo and Toronto,' he says.

Qadri has written poetry in Punjabi and English too. His book of poems titled *Aphorism* has also been translated into Danish.

Qadri's paintings are part of important collections in Paris, London and Hanover. 'Art is like a river. It is not based on thought, it's spontaneous. It's somewhere in your deeper consciousness. You can talk only about the process, *par banega kee, koyee nahi janda*. My whole life has been infused by yoga and tantra, which is a direct experience. It's like opening all the doors. When you are into it, you are either nothing or someone special,' he says.

The small community also carries the burden of an age-old legacy: infighting. 'The gurdwara fights are quite common. And the younger generation is struggling to come to terms with the new world,' says Manbir Singh of the Sikh Foundation.

Ulla Hanspal, a Dane who has been married to a Sikh businessman, Rajinder Singh, for two decades and is raising her three children as per Sikh tenets, puts things in perspective when she says, 'When you are in a new culture, you have to accept a lot of new things.'



(Above): Copenhagen-based Sikh scientist Tara Singh Gahoonia is busy creating new varieties of cereals.

(Top right): Sikh Foundation's Manbir Singh with his wife Dolly Sawhney outside their residence on the outskirts of the Danish capital.

(Centre): Ulla Hanspal, who is married to a Sikh, has definite views on religion.

(Right): Denmark's Queen Margrethe II tastes Indian cuisine at Taj Mahal Restaurant in Copenhagen.

Culture is not static. The Sikhs will have to make adjustments. We should teach our kids, not force them.'

Towards this end, Manbir Singh and wife, Dolly, have set up the Asian Music Academy to promote Indian music. 'This academy is being run by my wife and Tarlochan Singh Sagoo. There is a big response to Indian classical music. We teach vocal music, tabla and sitar. Harvinder Singh of Vestras helps us once in a while with his expertise,' says Manbir Singh.

Manbir Singh currently runs East-West Foods with Gurvinder Singh Dhami, who is the agent for Zee TV in Scandinavia.

That Indians are respected in Scandinavia is reflected in the remarks of the right-wing Danish People's Party leader, Pia Kjaersgaard, who once said that the Indians are a law-abiding community.

Down in Germany and the Netherlands, the 'eight-dollar hitchhikers' (till 1977 Indians travelling abroad were allowed to take only eight dollars with them!) of the early '70s are reaping a rich harvest now.

As Amarjeet Singh, a long-time resident of Berlin, recalls, 'In the first-ever Sikh function at the Indian consulate in Berlin on Guru Nanak's 500th birthday in 1969, just four Sikhs turned up.'

Sikhs have made their way into Germany and Holland from different directions. Many came from India via Kabul and Teheran while others came from East Africa.

Numbering about five thousand in 2002, they run small businesses — from eating joints to factories — both in big cities like Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Cologne and Amsterdam and in rural areas.

'Among the few Sikhs who have made it big is Kulbir Singh Kharbanda of Frankfurt who is considered the first Sikh millionaire in Germany,' says Amarjeet Singh.

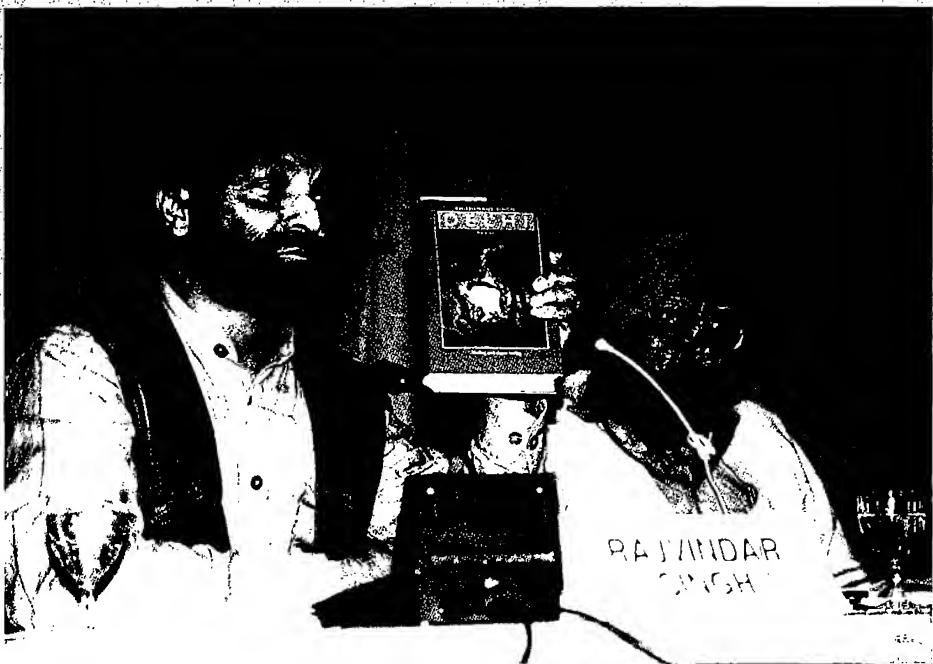
Amrik Singh Kohli has made a huge fortune in the fashion and boutique business.

Dr Rajinder Singh, a scientist with the Association of German Power Plant Operators that advises thermal power plant operators worldwide, is responsible for training their overseas engineers. Dr Harbhajan Singh is a research scientist with the German giant Daimler Benz. Dr Jasbir Singh and Dr Daljit Parmar are scientists of repute, with the latter holding many patents.

Since Berlin was barricaded from West Germany till November 1989, most Sikhs who reached East Berlin moved to the West for better opportunities.

'That's why there are so many Sikhs in cities like Frankfurt, Hamburg and Cologne,' says German-language poet Rajvinder Singh.

Rajvinder (or Raj as he is also known) came to Berlin in 1981 as a student and has stayed there even since. He says he is one of the top ten German language poets. With twelve books, including six of German poems and four anthologies, to his credit, he says, 'My works have



(Top): Rajvinder Singh, who is known in German literary circles, with Khushwant Singh in Berlin.

(Right): Rajvinder Singh at the Berlin Wall.

(Below): Amrita Cheema, formerly of NDTV, is the only coloured anchor on German Television.





been translated into Arabic, Galician, Catalan, Spanish and Albanian languages and I have travelled to forty-seven countries.'

His book-lined apartment in the Ritterlandweg area of Berlin contains some rare collections. 'I have one lexicon which has just thirteen copies in the world — and it is insured for a whopping forty lakh Indian rupees.'

Rajvinder says he was the first non-German to be made "poet laureate" by the German Literary Council in 1997. 'I stayed at the palace of King Friedrich the Great at Rheinsberg near Berlin for one year. Nine films were made on me in Germany,' says Raj with a broad smile.

He is also a member of PEN (International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Essayists, Editors and Novelists) and president of the German chapter of the Writers in Prisoner Committee.

A former assistant editor with the renowned German literary magazine *Lettre International*, Raj was in the forefront of the activities that culminated in the collapse of the Berlin Wall. 'I was right there when the Berlin Wall was broken down...'

For his role, Raj was felicitated by the speaker of the German Parliament.

He is currently busy translating Japji Sahib into German. 'Translating the Guru Granth Sahib into German is my life's mission,' says Raj.

Amrita Cheema, once a known face on New Delhi Television (NDTV), is currently with Deutsche Welle TV — Germany's international television channel.

'I am the only coloured anchor on DW-tv. One of the reasons for hiring me was that I was a recognized face in Asia through Star TV. They probably thought viewers in Asia and Africa would identify with me,' says Amrita between sips of tea in her apartment in Schoeneberg in Berlin.

During our free-wheeling discussion, chaste Punjabi words roll off her tongue. 'If you peel off all the layers of my identity, at the core I am a pucca Punjabi, and a Sikh. I am proud of my heritage. My father always told me to be bold and fearless — and to be inspired by our past. At home we speak Punjabi.'

Having been a student of history, Amrita is appalled by the tendency among Sikhs to squabble over trivial matters. 'Before I went to England for my D.Phil on Punjab on the formation of the Unionist Party, I did not even know there were separate gurdwaras for different groups. This is against the essential spirit of Sikhism,' says the newscaster.

Amarjeet Singh is the social spearhead of the Sikh community in Berlin. A product of the Ludhiana Engineering College, he came to Germany about four decades ago to join the electrical giant, AEG.

He has been active in community affairs since. He mobilized Sikhs to set up the first gurdwara in Berlin in 1974. 'Later we — about two hundred Sikhs of Berlin — purchased a building for the gurdwara in Berlin. It was a workshop, located in a good convenient area, not



(Above): Amarjeet Singh, who was the first turbaned Sikh to become citizen of Germany, is seen at the Berlin Wall.

(Right): Kulwant Beer Singh Jolly, who was the first to bring Indian groceries to Berlin, seen with his son at their eating joint in Berlin.



far from the city Centre. After renovation, the inauguration took place on 15 June 2002. We spent about 400,000 Euros to complete the work,' says Amarjeet, who works as a consultant for many export-import companies.

There are about two dozen gurdwaras in Germany. 'The one in Berlin is probably the best run. Hundreds of Sikhs in the Berlin area come here every Sunday. For langar, dates are booked months in advance,' he adds.

Amarjeet has the distinction of being the first turbaned Sikh to have acquired German citizenship.

'I had to wage a battle with the authorities because of my turban. They asked me how I, with my Indian appearance, would reconcile to being a German citizen. I told them that my turban posed no problem for my nationality. Since the German Constitution allows you the freedom of religion, they had no choice but to grant me citizenship,' says Amarjeet who is married to a German.

However, his troubles didn't end with the acquisition of citizenship. When he applied for a passport, he ran into fresh problems as the German law forbids the use of passport photos with a headgear. 'I told them that the turban was an article of faith for me.' He won.

Amarjeet fought — and won — yet another battle. 'The German authorities refused to accept Singh as a family or surname for the Sikhs, saying it was a family name for the Rajputs in India. The case went right up to the German Supreme Court and took more than two years. Our friend, Gurbinder Singh, spent a lot of time and money on this case. The highest German court decided in our favour. Every German Sikh now has the right to the family name "Singh".'

Sikhs in Germany, he says, face a peculiar problem. 'The German people are used to the Turks, Italians and Greeks who are in large numbers in this country. But they don't know much about the Sikhs and confuse us with them.'

Ajanta Food's Kulwant Beer Singh Jolly brought the taste of India — samosa — to Berlin.

And Ajanta Food Store is the oldest Indian shop in West Berlin.

'As more and more Germans visit India these days, Indian food is becoming very popular in Berlin. I import loads of basmati rice, pickles and masalas from India and England,' says Jolly.

Jolly worked as an engineer with the Indian Air Force at Talwara. After quitting the force, he ran a canteen at the base. 'I felt restless and left for Kabul, did odd jobs and bought second-hand jeeps and cars from Germany and sold them in Kabul.'

Later, he says, he got a driver's job with the Indian embassy in Berlin. 'It was there that I thought of introducing Indian food items like samosa.'



Madanjeet Singh, who is a Special Advisor to the UNESCO Director-General in Paris, also has a \$ 40,000 Peace Prize named after him.

Today, he dishes out a whole range of Indian delicacies to Berliners. His son, Sandeep Singh, runs an internet business company called Teta, with German Sat-1, the transport company BVG, and the Deutsche Bank being his customers..

Interestingly, there are many White Sikhs in Berlin. ‘They came under the influence of Yogi Harbhajan and converted to Sikhism. They observe the Sikh *maryada* more strictly than us,’ says Jolly.

Paris-based Madanjeet Singh was probably the first Sikh to join the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) in the early ’50s. Having served India in over one and a half dozen countries till 1982, Madanjeet Singh is now Special Advisor to the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and a Goodwill Ambassador for the organization.

An art historian, photographer, painter, artist and writer of international repute, he has been associated with UNESCO since its inception in 1953.

In recognition of his services, the UNESCO Executive Board in 1995 established the UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence.

Worth \$40,000, the prize is awarded on November 16 — also observed as UN Day of Tolerance. ‘I was attracted to the Gandhian path of non-violence during my school and college days. During the Quit India Movement, I was imprisoned,’ says Madanjeet Singh.

Described as “a Renaissance Man” by former UNESCO director-general Federico Mayor, Madanjeet Singh wrote his first art book, *Indian Sculpture in Bronze and Stone*, while he was still a student at the Italian Institute for Middle and Far East in Rome.

The second book titled *India, Paintings from Ajanta Caves*, came out in 1954. ‘Published in the US, the book marked the beginning of the UNESCO Art Series. I got three thousand dollars for it. In those days, one could buy a Mercedes-Benz with that money. When my mother wished that I give half the amount to charity, I refused,’ he laughs.

Madanjeet Singh’s subsequent publications include *Etruscan Cave Paintings; Indian Miniatures; Ajanta, the Paintings of Sacred and the Secular; Himalayan Art and The Sun in Myth and Art*.

His books on other subjects include *The White Horse* and *This My People*. His latest, *The Timeless Energy of the Sun*, was published in seven languages worldwide in 1998. His “moral outrage at the wrenching poverty of my people” has been poignantly articulated in *This My People*.

‘Alleviation of poverty and preservation of the environment,’ he says, ‘have been my twin goals since my student days.’ Towards this end, he set up the Sumitra Foundation in memory of his mother in the ’90s. In 2000, he launched the Rainbow Partnership project to promote sustainable growth through grassroots support in the seven nations of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Another Sikh artist in Europe who has made a name for himself is Switzerland-based Dev. ‘I am a nomad who has hopped across continents in search of creativity,’ says the mild-



Artist Dev in his studio at Rubigen near Berne.

mannered Dev, who was born at Jagraon in Punjab, raised in Nairobi and educated back in India.

Based at the picturesque town of Rubigen near Berne, Dev is seeped in the Paul Klee school of art. 'I moved to Europe in 1979 because my role model — Paul Klee — was there. He was one of the greatest lyricist painters of the twentieth century. Frankly, he has influenced art even more than Picasso,' says Dev, who has a studio in Barcelona and mounted exhibitions in many European cities.

European masters fascinate him, he says. 'To confront European modernism, I moved to Switzerland. It is profoundly satisfying to know that it (European modernism) has reached its saturation. The forms and attitudes have crystallised. Now they simply recycle the ideas of the '30s when Picasso and Klee held sway. It was the greatest period after the Renaissance. But Europe has lost that bohemianism,' Dev elaborates.

Modernism, he adds, is not a system or a model. 'It is the European way of looking at the world. But every culture has to define its own modernism. Look at Latin America. They are redefining their culture independent of the old Spanish influence. The likes of Gabriel and Pablo Neruda are creating a new voice with the Spanish language. Today's finest surrealist painter Matta is from Chile. Ditto for Latin music,' says Dev.

An accomplished Punjabi poet, Dev was felicitated by the Sahitya Akademi in February 2002 for his poetry collection titled *Shabdant*.

Happily enough, Europe is home to many Sikh renaissance men. 'Europe is the place to be in. You can scale any heights here,' winks Dev.

However, one Sikh who has climbed unimaginable heights is Neena Gill of the European Parliament in Strasbourg. 'I am the first woman MP of Asian origin in Europe,' beams Neena who was elected to the august house from England's West Midlands in 1999.

Ludhiana-born Neena, who is related to TV show hostess Simi Garewal and former Indian chief election commissioner M.S. Gill, left India for Britain when she was 10. 'Back in the '60s, even some well-off people from Punjab were leaving for Britain. My dad, who ran a factory and made films, too joined the bandwagon. But once you leave your country, you immediately become a second-class citizen in the new land. I could sense it and was determined to fight discrimination. The immigrants could get only menial jobs. That made me very angry.'

Not surprisingly, young Neena became active in student politics. 'I served as the deputy president of the Liverpool Polytechnic Students' Union where I did my degree in social sciences,' she says. Passionate as she was about issues surrounding social exclusion and economic regeneration, Neena became a housing specialist. 'I was chief executive of the Asra Greater London Housing Association and a board member of several housing societies. Working at the grass roots gave me an insight into the feelings of the immigrants. All along I have been involved in projects that promote involvement of ethnic minorities in the British political process. Towards this end, I have supported various initiatives like the Young People's Parliament and lectured at educational institutions in the Midlands,' says Neena who has



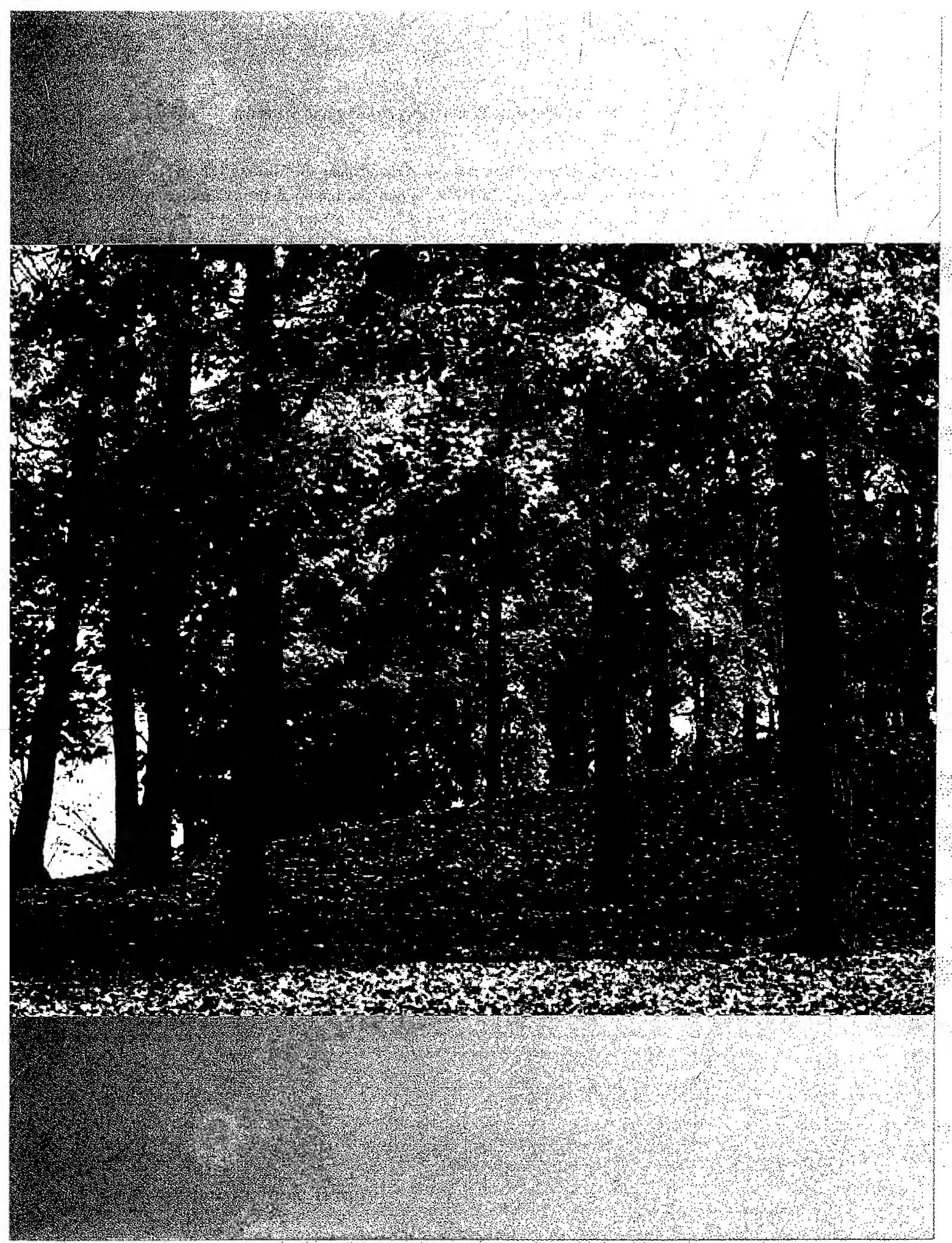
Neena Gill, who represents England's West Midlands in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, is the first Asian woman to become an MP anywhere in the West. In this picture, she is seen with Gordon Brown, British Chancellor of the Exchequer.

three publications — Race and Housing; Women and Housing and Standards in Housing — to her credit.

In 1978, she joined the Labour Party and was soon advising the Shadow Labour leader. There has been no looking back since. 'In 1999, Labour put me up as their candidate from West Midlands for the European Parliament, and I have also been endorsed for the 2004 elections,' says Neena who produces the monthly Strasbourg Newsround which details all the political developments in the EU. 'Europe's politics today revolves around the European Parliament. It does about 60 per cent of all legislative work in the continent,' she explains.

As an MEP, she is a full member of the Budget Committee and a substitute member of the Industry, External Trade, Research and Energy Committee. 'I am also Vice President for the Parliamentarian Delegation for Relations with South Asia. Thus developments in Kashmir are of great concern to me and I have been pushing for greater involvement by the EU in the region. I am also a member of the Campaign for Parliamentary Reform, the Energy Foundation and the EIF Internet Foundation.'

What does her election as an MEP symbolize? 'I think my election has brought down yet another barrier for ethnic minorities. We immigrants have come a long way.' Indeed.





CANADA:

OVERACHIEVERS GALORE

anada is the land of the maple leaf. And it is also the land of Sikh overachievers! Turbaned security men and cabbies greet you at Toronto airport. Signboards in Punjabi flash past as you drive into the city.

Welcome to the Punjabi heartland! Indeed, nowhere outside India have the Sikhs accomplished so much as in Canada. The 600,000-strong community, which makes up about two per cent of the Canadian population, is visible and thriving in all walks of life. The Sikh roll of honour is replete with tycoons, ministers, MPs, MLAs, mayors, professionals, realtors, judges, lawyers, corporate bigwigs, transporters and sports stars.

Drive into any town, and you invariably come across a gurdwara. 'There are about 150 Sikh shrines in this far-flung land,' says Balbir Jwanda of the India Cultural Centre of Canada in Richmond.

Punjabi signboards are as common on Gerrard Street in Toronto and on Main Street in Vancouver as they are in Ludhiana and Jalandhar.

Punjabi is taught in schools and colleges in British Columbia and Ontario. Radio and TV stations broadcast dozens of Punjabi programmes every week which take you back to the Punjab countryside.

'So much so that government notifications carry instructions in Punjabi, which is the sixth most common (spoken) language in Canada. In British Columbia and Ontario provinces, it ranks third after English and Chinese,' says Prof Sadhu Singh Binning, who teaches Punjabi at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and has written a number of books, including *No More Watno Dur* on Indian immigrants in North America.

Chips in Balwant Sanghera, president of the Punjabi Language Education Association, 'Punjabi is very popular here. Writers have banded together to bring out books in Punjabi. Our association is working with Simon Fraser University to set up a Punjabi Heritage Center and develop curricula for schools and colleges.'

Diwali and Baisakhi are celebrated not only in cities and towns, but also in the Canadian Parliament where the prime minister joins in the festivities.

Tandoori is the taste of Canada!

'When I came to Canada as a tourist in 1970, food used to be pretty bland. I stayed back and introduced tandoori. The Canadians lapped it up,' says Gurjit Chadha of Moti Mahal restaurant in Toronto.

Canada is the first country in the western world to have put many Sikhs in top-notch positions. Ujjal Dosanjh created history in February 2000 when he took oath as the first coloured premier of British Columbia province.

When Herb Dhaliwal was sworn in as Canada's revenue minister in June 1997, he became the first South Asian to get a Cabinet berth anywhere in the western world.

Gurbax Malhi is the first turbaned Sikh MP anywhere in the western world.

Speaking about 'first' Sikhs, Herb Doman is by far the richest Sikh and one of the biggest sawmill owners in Canada.

Purewal Farms in British Columbia produce more blueberries than anyone else in the world. 'We produce half of the 50-million pound blueberries raised in British Columbia and supply to the whole of North America, Japan and Europe. You know, blueberries are used in wines, muffins and ice creams,' says Malkit Singh Purewal who came to Canada from Hakimpur village in Punjab in 1970 and bought his first fifty acres in 1981.

With a turnover of forty million dollars in 2002, Purewal Farms were declared the Supplier of the Year by North America's biggest supermarket chain — Safeway Stores. 'We roll out about a thousand containers every year,' Malkit Singh says. The three brothers are known kabaddi players and hold an annual Olympic mela at their native village in Punjab.

Dalel Singh is the biggest herb producer in North America. 'We produce the best varieties of herbs, baby lettuces, vegetables and edible flowers, and source directly the finest olive oils and Bernardo Pastas used in the Vatican,' he says, while taking a delegation around his farms near Vancouver.

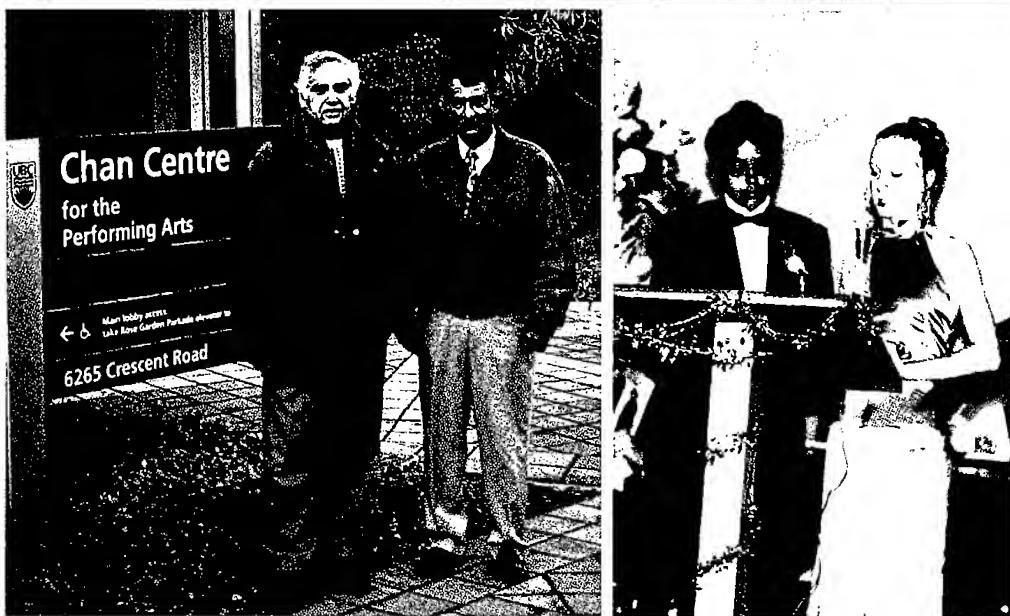
The brainy Tim Singh and his wife, Jyl, of Cloverdale Farms have pioneered the concept of farm tourism in British Columbia. 'Every season, we cut "puzzle patterns" in our maize fields. Tourists walk through these "puzzle" paths to find their way out. It takes up to two hours to work one's way out. On the way, these tourists pass over three eight-foot-high wooden bridges. Sometimes they run into dead-ends. Guinness Record holder Adrian Fisher of Britain designs these patterns for us. In 2000, he designed a castle. In 2001, it was the Wild West. We got more than 15,000 visitors in 2002,' beams Jyl Singh.



(Top): Purewal Brothers grow more blueberries than anyone in North America.

(Right): Promoting Punjabi language and culture are Balwant Sanghera and Sadhu Binning.

(Extreme right): Young Jagtaran Singh of Toronto has won many turban competitions.



The achievers' list is endless.

A far cry from the days of Komagata Maru when more than 350 immigrants, mostly Sikhs, on board the ship were barred from entering Vancouver Port and turned back to face police bullets in Calcutta.

Still, why did Canada attract Sikhs? It was simply because of the vast opportunities the country offered.

The first Sikh immigrants into Canada were retired soldiers who had served in British outposts in Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong.

In 1897, when the British celebrated Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, they brought contingents to London from their colonies. 'Sikh soldiers were sent from Hong Kong. The Queen was very impressed by the Sikh troops and ordered that they be shown Canada on their way back. They came to Halifax from London by ship. Then they took train to Vancouver. On the way, these soldiers passed through Canada's five thousand km virgin countryside and saw its vast potential,' says Vancouver-based Col Pritam Singh Jauhal, who in 1993 successfully fought for the right of turban-wearing veterans to enter any legion in Canada.

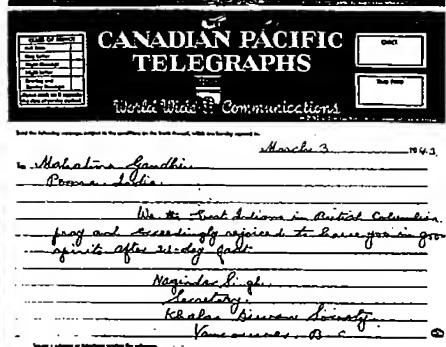
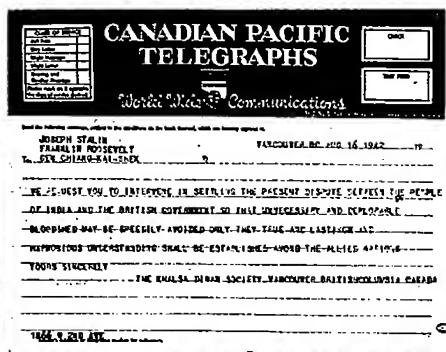
Back in their barracks in Hong Kong, these soldiers narrated the 'prospects' in the new land to their comrades. The word spread.

On retirement, many Sikh soldiers headed for Canada rather than Punjab. Many took early discharge and followed the Canadian trail. 'These men would earn one dollar a day against one or two *annas* in Punjab in those days. Their tales of success prompted many poor farmers in Punjab to leave for Canada via Hong Kong. The Canadian Pacific Railway had just been completed. Jungles were being cut and sawmills were coming up in a big way. These mills needed additional hands. Sikh immigrants filled this vacuum,' says Joginder Singh Parmar, secretary of Paldi village gurdwara on Vancouver Island.

Paldi, in fact, was the first Sikh settlement in Canada. 'Having saved enough money, many Sikh labourers bought a sawmill here, and they named the place after their native village of Paldi in Punjab,' explains Parmar.

At its peak, Paldi had 1,200 residents. 'Since only men had come from India, Paldi was an all-male village. On 1 July every year, they met in Paldi for Jor Mela. There used to be the usual village games. Mayo Singh and Kapoor Singh, the two rich and prominent Sikhs, used to live here. Those going to India would carry messages from here and those who had just arrived from India would deliver messages here. These men raised cows and chickens. A Chinese vegetable vendor came for daily rounds. There was also an elementary school, and a bus plied through the village.'

Walking around this deserted village, one comes across old streets still bearing the names of its first residents. Paldi sits next to the town of Duncan. The Canadian government plans to put the village on the Heritage List. Built in 1911, the oldest Sikh shrine in North America, the Abbotsford gurdwara is already on the List. It was given this status in 2002.



(Top left): Abbotsford gurdwara, which is one of the oldest Sikh shrines in North America, was put on the Heritage List by the Canadian government in 2002.

(Top right): Joginder Singh Parmar (left), caretaker of Paldi gurdwara, with Terry Lashman.

(Above): As these documents show, the Khalsa Diwan Society played an important role in India's freedom struggle.

(Left): Mayo Singh (centre), who later became the first Sikh millionaire in Canada, receiving Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in Vancouver in 1948.



The *Hindustan Times* (left) then and (right) now, which played a major role in India's freedom struggle, was launched with the backing of Canadian Sikhs. Today it is the largest selling newspaper in north India. Courtesy: *Hindustan Times*

'The Sikhs set up the Khalsa Diwan Society in 1906. And Canada's first gurdwara came up on Second Avenue in Vancouver in 1907,' says Surrey-based Sikh scholar Raghbir Singh, who is credited with creating the first CD-ROM on Sikhism in 1997.

'The Society played an important role in India's freedom struggle by championing the national cause with world leaders. It sent five thousand dollars towards the setting up of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) in 1923,' claims a Society office-bearer.

Unfortunately, the first Sikh wave into Canada coincided with a recession in 1907. New immigration was stopped. Plans were mooted to send Sikhs to Honduras. British Columbia disenfranchised them in 1907.

Deputy labour minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, who later became Canada's prime minister, went to London to discuss ways to check influx from India, and came up with the following suggestions:

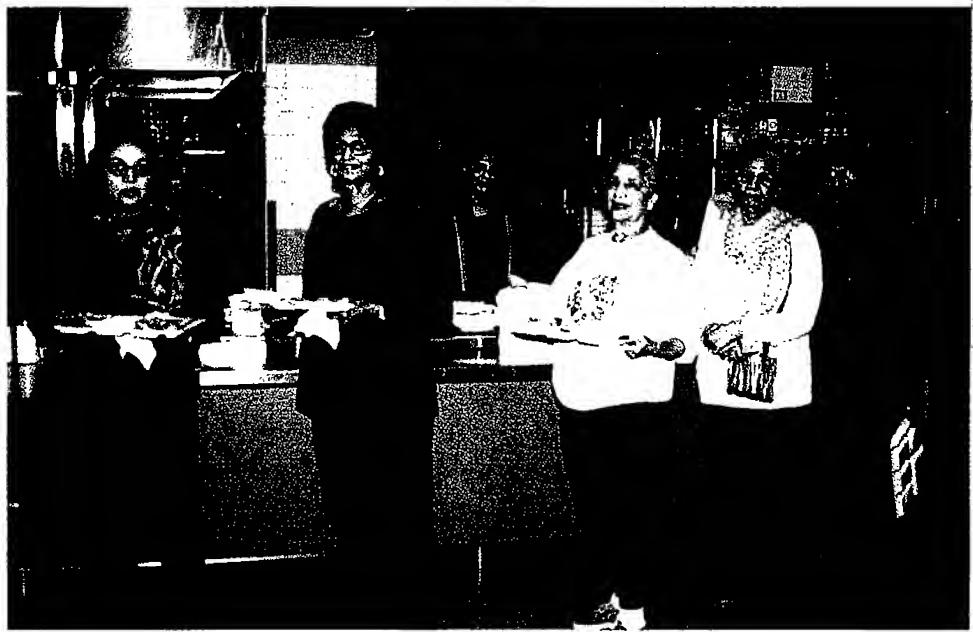
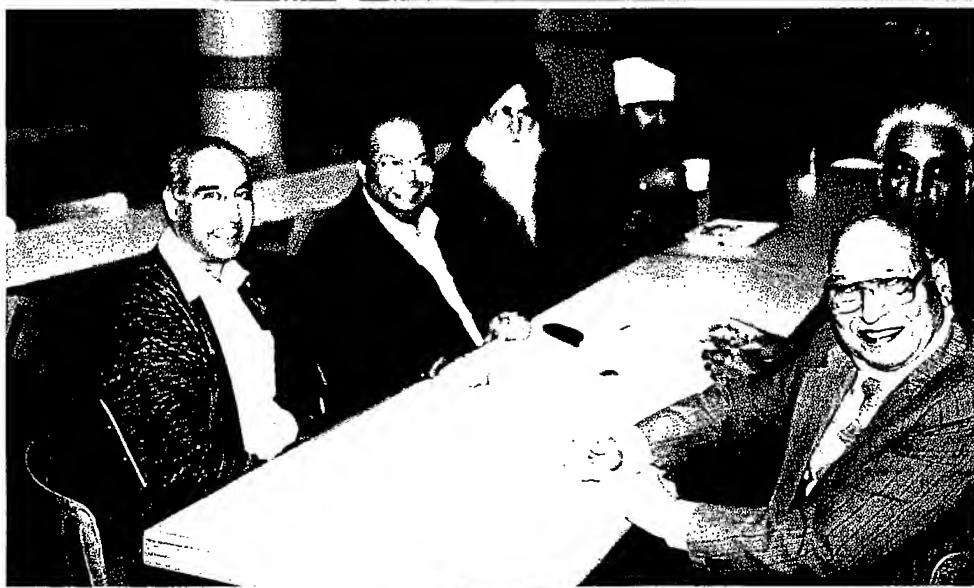
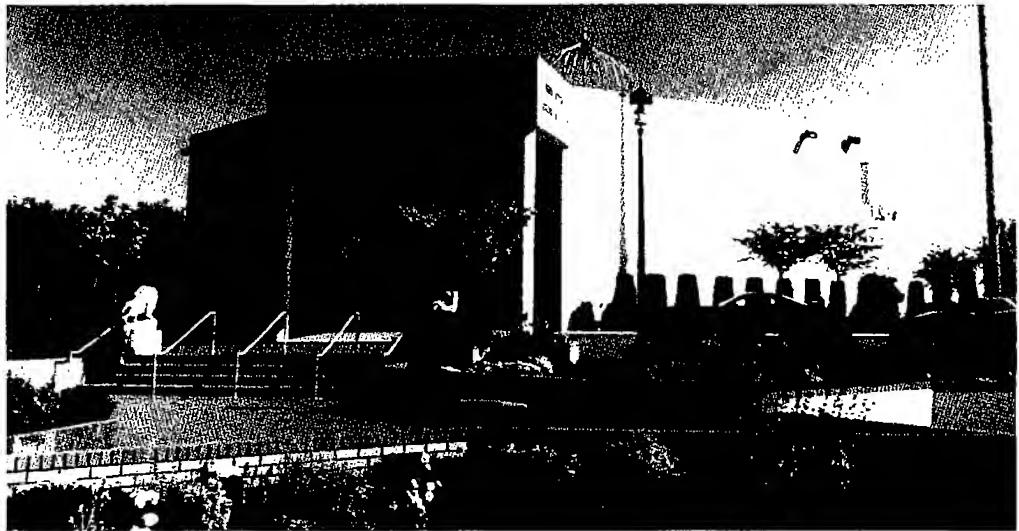
1. Enact a law in (British) India to stop emigration.
2. Allow in only those immigrants who come to Canada by non-stop or 'continuous' journey from their native place.
3. Grant the new immigrants entry only if they had \$200 on their person.

Few Sikhs could raise two hundred dollars in those days. And no one could make a 'continuous' journey from India as ships plied only between Hong Kong and Vancouver.

Those who went to India to meet their families were allowed re-entry only if they produced proof of previous residence.

When Bhag Singh and Balwant Singh, secretary and *granthi* of the Vancouver gurdwara respectively, brought in their wives and children, the latter were not allowed entry because they were new immigrants and had broken their journey in Hong Kong.

However, immigration officials relented in this case. And Canada's first Sikh baby, Hardial, was born to this *granthi* (Balwant Singh) in 1912. Balwant Singh was later hanged in India for participating in revolutionary activities.



(Top): The famous India Cultural Centre of Canada in Richmond, Vancouver, has contributed 175,000 dollars towards setting up a school in the quake-hit Gujarat.

(Centre): A far cry from 1947: As this gathering at the India Cultural Centre of Canada shows, Sikhs are flourishing in Canada today.

(Right): Women devotees partaking of *langar* at the gurdwara.

Then the Komagata Maru tragedy happened. The 376 passengers, mostly Sikhs, were not allowed to disembark from the ship when it reached Vancouver on 23 May 1914. This Japanese ship had been hired by a wealthy Sikh, Gurdit Singh, to bring these passengers from — Hong Kong, Shanghai and Yokohama — to Canada to challenge the new regulations, and, if possible, win in court.

Because of anti-British feelings in Punjab at that time, Canadians suspected that the passengers had links with Ghadar Party revolutionaries based in America and did not allow them to disembark. A stalemate ensued.

On 17 July 1914, when the ship was ordered to leave, the passengers got violent. They were subdued and turned back to face police bullets on their return to Calcutta. Many died. Others were arrested.

The incident shook Canadian Sikhs. They felt humiliated. And the World War-induced recession rendered them jobless. When the Ghadar Party under Kartar Singh Sarabha, an engineering student at Berkeley, called for a revolt in India, many Canadian Sikhs left for their motherland.

Another big event of 1914-15 was the killing of Inspector William Hopkinson by Mewa Singh of Lopoke. ‘Because anti-British feelings in Punjab had spread to Punjabis in Canada as well, police officer Hopkinson came from India to spy on Sikh revolutionaries. Through his informer Bela Singh, he got Bhag Singh shot dead in the city gurdwara. A month later, Mewa Singh killed Hopkinson in the city court. Hopkinson was an Anglo-Indian,’ says Jarnail Bhandal of the Khalsa Diwan Society.

In 1919, Canada bowed to British pressure and gave Sikhs the right to bring in their wives. The reason was that Sikh troops were fighting for the British in the War, and Britain didn’t want any discontent among them. Family reunions became common.

However, the Sikh struggle for citizenship continued through the ’30s and ’40s till Nazi crimes sensitized Canada to the issue of racial discrimination. America bestowed voting rights on Asians in 1946. Canada followed suit in 1947.

‘Luckily for them, citizenship rights coincided with a post-War boom. American multinationals opened units in Canada and needed labour,’ says Prof Hari P. Sharma, formerly of Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. ‘The development of highways, transport and communications boomed. Felling of trees, trucking them and making timber in sawmills opened up endless job opportunities. *Kanada Khul Gaya* (Canada has opened up) appeared on huge billboards across Punjab. I remember the days when I would fly from New Delhi to Vancouver with a planeload of passengers in their typical Punjabi attire; many with their clothes and even a *rajai* (quilt) tied up with strings and held under the arms,’ he says.

The Sikh stream into Canada has flowed unabated since.

‘About twenty thousand Indians come to Canada annually. Of these, more than sixty per cent are Sikhs. In 2002, Sikhs were the second largest minority in Canada, after the Chinese,’ says Kulvinder Kular, editor of the *Link* weekly in Vancouver.



Led by Col. Pritam Singh Jauhal (saluting), Sikh soldiers who retired from the British Army, participating in the R-Day celebrations at the residence of Indian Consul General B Jaishankar in Vancouver on Jan 26, 2003.  
Photo courtesy: Chandra Bodalia.



Show-biz: Ruby Bhatia, Harbhajan Mann and Jazzy B come from Canada.

Though Sikhs cut their political teeth in 1950 when Naranjan Singh was elected Canada's first Sikh councillor and later mayor in Mission town, big political breaks came only in the '80s when the community increased in numbers. Today, the political who's who of the community includes Ujjal Dosanjh, Herb Dhaliwal, Harry Lali, Moe Sihota, Gurbax Malhi, Gurmant Grewal, Gulzar Cheema, Sindi Hawkins, Raminder Gill, Karn Manhas, Raj Pannu.

Herb Doman and Asa Johal are famous Sikh timber tycoons.

Wallace Oppal is a judge in the British Columbia Supreme Court.

Crowned with the Order of Canada, T. Sher Singh is the country's most celebrated Sikh lawyer.

Wrestler Tiger Jeet Singh is a former world champion. His son, Tiger Ali Singh, was the first Asian face on WWF.

Ajit Tiwana became the first South Asian woman cop in Canada and the western world.

Baltej Singh Dhillon was the first turbaned Sikh to enter the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1990. Jagdeep Singh is the first turbaned commissioned officer in the Canadian Air Force.

The late Tara Singh Hayer, who launched Punjabi journalism in North America by starting *The Indo-Canadian Times* in 1978, is listed among a hundred individuals who made a definite contribution to Canadian society. His son, Dave Hayer, is not only an MLA but also a proud inheritor of his father's legacy. *The Indo-Canadian Times* is taking big strides under him.

'My dad was the first non-White journalist to be included in the Canadian Hall of Fame for the press in 2000. The Canadian Press Association has named an award after him. Before *The Indo-Canadian Times*, he started *Watno Dur* in the early 1970s. Today, *The Indo-Canadian Times* caters to more than a hundred thousand readers,' says Dave who was elected as an MLA in May 2001.

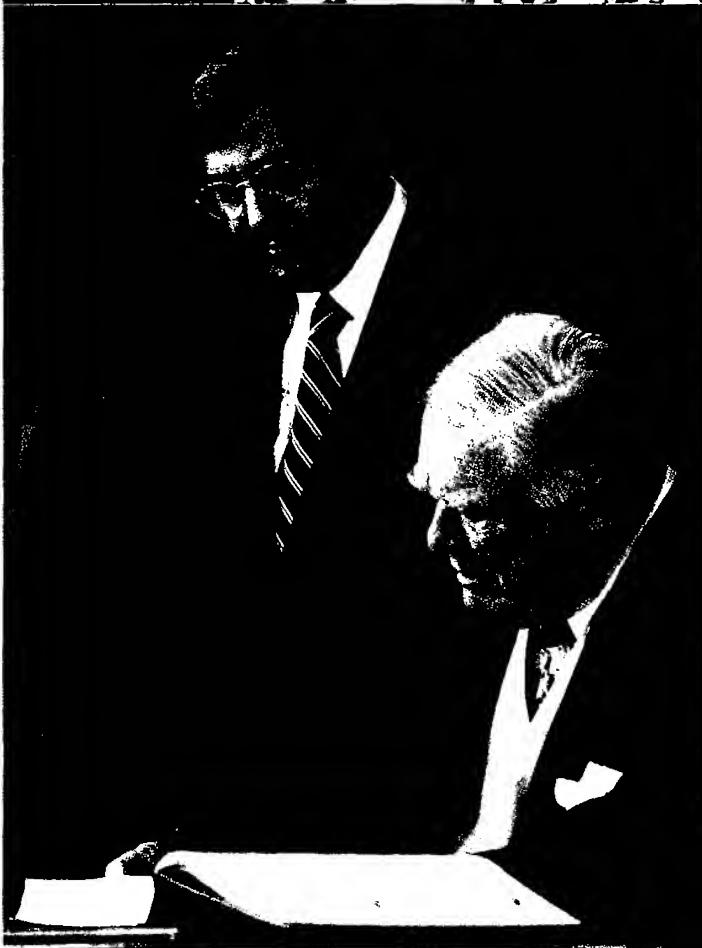
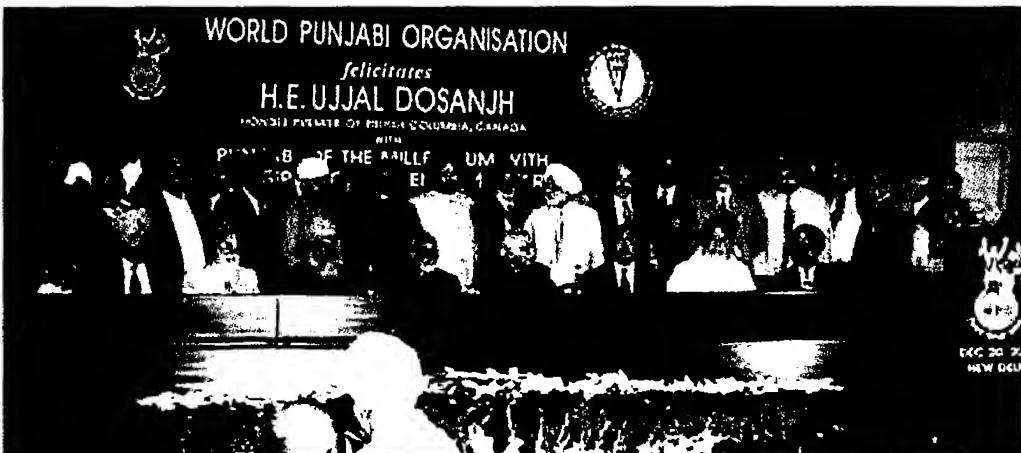
From Canada rose pop stars Harbhajan, Gursewak and Jazzy B, TV hosts Ruby Bhatia and Kamal Sidhu and CNN's Satinder Bindra and Monita Rajpal.

Noted writer Shauna Singh Baldwin too comes from Canada. Shauna has authored three books — *English Lessons and Other Stories*, *A Foreign Visitor's Guide to America* and *What the Body Remembers* — and has bagged the Saturday Night/CBC Literary Prize.

In the corporate world, Sabi Marwah is the senior executive vice-president of Scotiabank. Gary Singh is a top-notch investment broker of Toronto.

Ujjal Dosanjh summed up the Sikh story in Canada after his swearing-in as British Columbia's premier in February 2000, saying, 'Had the passengers of Komagata Maru been alive today, they would have said: "Well done, boys! You have done us proud." Let's forgive and forget and bury the past.'

For its part, the Canadian government buried the past by tendering an apology for Komagata Maru in 1989 on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the tragedy. 'As a goodwill gesture, a plaque was installed in Portal Park in downtown Vancouver, overlooking the ocean inlet



(Right): Ujjal Dosanjh, who created history in February 2000 by becoming the first coloured premier in Canada, with his wife Raminder.  
Photo courtesy: Vancouver Sun.

(Above): Ujjal after the swearing-in ceremony.  
Photo courtesy: Vancouver Sun.

(Top and above right ): Ujjal being felicitated in New Delhi.



where Komagata Maru stood,' says Prof Hari Sharma, the brain behind the Komagata Maru Historical Society which sought a government apology for Komagata Maru.

In 1999, Prime Minister Jean Chretien went a step further in his speech to mark the tercentenary celebrations in parliament. He said, 'The welcome they (Sikhs) received at that time and many years after is not one that does credit to Canada. Indeed, what Canadians today take for granted — our commitment to respecting fundamental human rights — the Sikh experience reminds us that this has not always been the case. With us tonight are Herb Dhaliwal, and my dear friend Gurbax. As you know, Herb is the first person of South Asian origin to be appointed to the Cabinet in any western democracy and Gurbax is the first turbaned Sikh to be elected as a Member of Parliament in the western world. They (the accomplishments of Herb and Gurbax) might seem small to some, but I know for many of you it is a big, big thing. And this is due to the perseverance and persistence of Sikhs in demanding their rightful place in Canadian society.'

'We have come together for a new celebration — a celebration of a century of Sikh vibrancy and achievement in Canada and the third centenary of the Khalsa — the sword of everything that you hold dear. The creation (referring to the postage stamp on the Khalsa) of this beautiful stamp by Canada Post confirms our experience that it is often the small gesture that conveys the most profound message. I can think of no more simple or eloquent way to show how Canada values the richness of Sikh culture and faith, thereby proclaiming it every day on cards and letters we mail to each other around the world. By this act, we speak the profound truth that Canada is a better place because the Sikh people have joined us in the common project of building the best country in the world. Let's celebrate how far we have come together and let's celebrate the great days to come.'

Poring over papers in his study at his South West Marine Drive residence in Vancouver, Ujjal Dosanjh says, 'Yes, we have come far. Canada has evolved. The colour of your skin does not matter any more. It is a tribute to our society, which has become truly multi-cultural. If a person like me — who landed in Canada when he was twenty and didn't know much English — can become a premier, it says a lot about Canada.'

Ujjal is one of history's midnight children. Born at Dosanjh village near Jalandhar in 1947, he left for England at the age of seventeen. 'When I left Indian shores in 1964, I could barely speak English. I enrolled for higher studies, but I sort of got disillusioned and left Britain in 1968,' he says.

Coming from a family of freedom fighters in Punjab, Ujjal says, 'My maternal grandfather, who was active in the freedom struggle, was jailed several times. My father was an active member of the Congress in the 1930s. I grew up listening to my maternal grandfather and father debating political issues. When I was in school, I once went with my mom to a political conference at Chabewal near Hoshiarpur. There I sat in the lap of the great freedom fighter Dr Kitchlew. To this day, I remember his beard rubbing against my cheeks. That was my first lesson in politics.'

In Vancouver, young Ujjal worked in sawmills to pay his way through college. 'I met my wife Raminder in college,' he says.



(Top): Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien (second from right) releasing a postal stamp to mark the tercentenary of the Khalsa in 1999. Federal minister Herb Dhaliwal (extreme right) and Gurbux Malhi (extreme left) are also seen in the picture.

(Above right): Moe Sahota was the first Sikh MLA and minister in British Columbia.

(Above left): Gurmant Grewal is an MP for the Reform Party.

Currently a teacher in Vancouver Community College, Raminder narrates amid peels of laughter how she rebuffed Ujjal when he sought her acquaintance one day. ‘Ujjal and I were students at Langara College. We didn’t know each other. One day, he walked up to me and asked me the name of my village. I said it was none of his business. I had never lived in a village in India as my father was in the army. I found his question very stupid.’

Ujjal smiles back, ‘In the end, I won and she lost.’

Having earned a law degree, Ujjal started his practice. ‘I wanted to become a great lawyer.’ However, he was destined for even greater things.

Since politics was in his blood, he joined the New Democratic Party. The turmoil in Punjab in the 1980s had its repercussions in Canada. Ujjal opposed militancy and almost paid for it with his life. To this day, he carries the scars his attackers inflicted on him.

‘I could not contest the 1986 British Columbia elections because of the Punjab violence. When you have events as powerful as those, you cannot remain untouched. I have never compromised on principles.’

Then came the British Columbian Assembly elections in 1991, and Ujjal won. Four years later, he was the attorney general of British Columbia. In 1999, when Premier Glen Clark stepped down amid controversies, Ujjal was the choice. He took oath in February 2000 and bowed out in May 2001.

Referring to his brief stint as premier, Ujjal says, ‘The gates are open now. The march is on ... the march towards equality, fairness and inclusion.’

Federal Minister Herb Dhaliwal is in accord. ‘Yes, the march is on. The Sikhs have accomplished a lot here and it proves that we are an open society and Canadians are fair-minded people. There is a lot more pride in the Indian community about its role and contribution to Canadian society. I think this sends a very loud message to our youngsters that if they work hard and get a good education, they can go far in life. Whenever I meet them I always tell them that they should take pride in their heritage. They can chart out their future course only if they know where they have come from,’ he says, participating in a ceremony at the India Cultural Centre of Canada in Richmond on the outskirts of Vancouver.

Herb is the first South Asian to become a federal minister anywhere in the West. A proud Sikh, Herb took his ministerial oath in June 1997 on a *Sikh Gutka*.

Born in Chiheru village near Phagwara in 1952, Herb moved to Canada when he was six. ‘My grandfather had come to Vancouver in 1906. My father joined him later in 1952,’ says Herb, who has made millions in transport, maintenance and real estate and is considered the second richest MP in Canada.

Back in the 1950s, the Dhaliwal family was hard up. ‘Dad worked on farms and mom washed dishes and picked berries to support my five sisters and me.’

Young Herb developed a sharp business acumen. He would raise money at golf by selling Coke and picking up empties. ‘To pay my way through university, I did every available job: I was a gas jockey, a cab driver, and a sawmill worker.’



(Top left): Herbance (Herb) Singh Dhaliwal became the first coloured minister in any western country in 1997

(Right): Dhaliwal seen with the giants of the Indian film industry, including Subhash Ghai, Amit Khanna, Yash Johar and Dharmendra.

(Top right): Gurbux Malhi is the first turbaned Sikh MP in the West.

But how did he make it big in both politics and business?

Herb smiles, 'For me, politics and business started at the University of British Columbia where I got my degree in commerce in 1977. My dear friend Mike Olak and I used to think up various business strategies to make money. So, we started with building maintenance work from the basement of my home in Vancouver. Moe Sihota, who in 1986 became the first Indo-Canadian MLA, was my contemporary at the university.'

By the time Herb got his degree, his janitorial firm — Moonlight Maintenance — had expanded to about a hundred employees. 'In the end, we had more than five hundred,' he says.

Getting into business full-time, Herb branched into transportation and real estate. 'As an entrepreneur, I held various positions: vice chair of the Board of Directors of the British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority and chair of British Hydro's budget and audit committees.' However, politics never took a back seat.

Herb took the plunge in 1993 when he contested the Vancouver south parliamentary seat on a Liberal Party ticket. He won. Four years later, he retained the seat.

Then came the big break. On 11 June 1997, Prime Minister Jean Chretien invited him aboard his Cabinet as revenue minister. Since then he has risen in status and held the portfolio for fisheries and oceans and is presently minister for natural resources.

A close friend and occasional golfing partner of the prime minister, Herb was mentioned in the media in mid-2001 as a possible contender for the ruling Liberal Party's leadership.

In an interview with *The Toronto Star* in February 2001, he said, 'If somebody had told my grandfather ... that his grandson would be a Cabinet minister, he probably would have said: "You're drinking too much".'

Ask him about the possibility of a non-White prime minister in Canada, and Herb says thoughtfully, 'Look, merit counts in Canada.'

Put the same question to another three-time Sikh MP, Gurbax Malhi of Toronto, and he says, 'Your complexion does not count in Canada. I have won thrice because of White voters.'

Malhi moved to Canada in 1975 and worked his way up through factories to become the first turbaned Sikh MP in the West in 1993.

'When people first saw me on television, they wrote letters asking questions about my turban. Visitors to parliament would pose with me. There are 301 MPs and thousands of employees in the House of Commons, but I am the only turbaned Sikh among them,' Malhi beams, chatting with his constituents in his Brampton office in Toronto.

He worked tirelessly to bring Baisakhi and Diwali celebrations to the Canadian Parliament. 'Each year, the prime minister and the whole House join in in the festivities. When we requested him to issue a stamp on the Khalsa in 1999, he obliged promptly,' Malhi adds.

Gurmant Grewal, a post-graduate of Punjab Agriculture University at Ludhiana, is yet another Sikh MP in the Canadian Parliament.



(Top): Indo-Canadian MLAs with Indian Consul General B Jaishankar (with specs in centre) in Vancouver.

(Above): British Columbia's minister Gulzar Cheema with his wife.

In provincial politics, Moe Sihota was the first Sikh to become an MLA in British Columbia in 1986. 'It was Moe who opened the gates for us. Harry Lali and Ujjal followed,' says Karn Manhas, who, at the age of twenty-four, became the youngest MLA in the history of British Columbia in May 2001.

'By 2002, the Sikhs constituted eight per cent of the British Columbia population, and had seven MLAs — Patty Sahota, Ravi Nijjar, Tony Bhullar, Dave Hayer, Sindi Hawkins and Gulzar Cheema and myself,' says Manhas.

Of these, Sindi (Surinder) Hawkins and Gulzar Cheema are ministers of state for health, planning and mental health respectively. 'Our province allocates forty per cent of its budget for the health ministry', says Cheema, who moved to Canada in 1979.

Hailing from Bariar village near Gurdaspur, he is an MBBS from Ludhiana Medical College. 'I came to Manitoba for marriage. My wife is a teacher,' says Cheema. He was roped in by the Liberal Party for his community and medical work and fielded for an Assembly seat in 1988. In the process, he became the first South Asian MLA in Manitoba. In 1993, he moved to British Columbia where he contested for the Surrey seat in 1996, but lost. He won in May 2001 to become minister for mental health.

Since a large-scale Sikh influx into the East Coast began only in the '70s, the community did not open its political innings in Eastern Canada till Raminder Gill won as a Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) in Ontario in the year 2000.

Raminder belongs to one of Toronto's oldest Sikh families. 'My grandfather was one of the first Sikhs to land in Toronto in 1913. My uncle, Jamiat Singh (Jimmy Gill), who came to Toronto in the 1930s, was one of the founders of Toronto's first gurdwara on Pape Avenue in the 1960s. We opened Toronto's first grocery store named India Trading Company and India House Restaurant in 1945.'

Raminder moved to Canada from Nathuwala Jadid village near Moga at the age of seventeen in 1968. A fitness freak, he set up Toronto's first Indian sports club in 1972 while still pursuing his degree in chemical engineering.

He was happily running his businesses — Genpro Canada Ltd and All Round Travel — when Ontario's ruling Progressive Conservative Party asked him to contest as an MPP.

He won to become deputy to the Minister for Education Training. 'Ontario accounts for fifty per cent of Canada's economy and there is a huge demand for higher education. We spend more than fifteen billion dollars on the universities annually,' he says.

For his devotion to work in the provincial parliament, Raminder was listed in *Queen's Park Insider* magazine as 'one of the two new hardest working MPPs' for the year 2000.

In April 2002, Raminder was elevated as parliamentary assistant (for inter-governmental affairs) to the Ontario premier. At his initiative, Ontario has earmarked May as the South Asian Heritage Month from 2002.



(Top): Ontario's first Sikh MPP, Raminder Gill, with his premier Mike Harris.

(Below): Millionaire Prem Singh Vinning with his friend and Prime Minister Jean Chretien.

(Right): Social activist Charan Gill initiated the fight for rights of immigrants.



Says Raminder, 'After 9/11, any bearded person wearing a turban was looked upon with suspicion. I took the initiative to set up the South Asian Heritage Committee and got the month of May declared as the South Asian Heritage Month. Our aim is not only to highlight our accomplishments, but also promote awareness about us among the mainstream community.'

Another Gill who has played a very significant role in creating awareness about the immigrant community is Charan Singh of British Columbia. For his work, Charan Gill has been decorated with the Order of British Columbia. He heads the BC Organization to Fight Racism and the Progressive Indo-Canadian Community Services Society (PICS). In the '70s, Gill co-founded the Canadian Farm Workers' Union to consolidate immigrant workers. 'From this consolidation flowed political power for the community. And we started getting elected as MLAs and MPs,' says Charan Gill. From activism, he ventured into politics.

Born in Hong Kong and raised in India, Gill worked on his family farm and earned his MA degree in 1959. He left for Canada in 1967. 'My first job as a berry picker gave me an insight into the life of the immigrant community here. To my dying day, I will fight for social justice,' he says.

Another Vancouver Sikh who entered politics from union activism is multi-millionaire Prem Singh Vinning. The media refers to him as Prime Minister Chretien's 'best friend.'

Indeed, Vinning is Chretien's man on the British Columbian Liberal Party executive.

The suave Vinning refuses to acknowledge his importance. 'Why should one feel self-important? Let us talk about the community first,' he says, breakfasting at a restaurant near False Creek. The success of Ujjal, Herb, Sahota and others, he says, shows that Canadian Sikhs are now part of the mainstream.

Vinning is a self-made multi-millionaire and part owner of Jackpine Forest Products Limited that deals in speciality products.

He came to Canada via England. 'I was six when my family left Punjab for England. We stayed there for fourteen years and then moved to Canada for a better life,' he says.

While working at the Canim Sawmills near Vancouver, Vinning got sucked into trade union politics. Workers chose him as their leader. 'There used to be a lot of politics in our home as I was a union leader, while one of my brothers was with the management as a supervisor,' he laughs.

From unionism, politics was the next logical step. Vinning contested and won a council seat in Houston town in 1984. As he accumulated resources, he set up Jackpine Forest Products Limited in 1987.

He moved to Vancouver in 1990 to test the national political waters. He contested for Parliament on a Liberal Party ticket in 1993, but lost. 'The experience taught me a lot and brought me closer to the prime minister,' he smiles.



(Left): Sawmill tycoon Asa Johal receives the Order of Canada from the Governor-General in Ottawa in 1992.

(Above top): Johal with his wife, Kashmir Kaur.

(Above centre): Johal with PS Bedi and the late Dr Inderjit Singh (centre).

(Above): Johal with his family.

His stock — both in business and political — has been on the rise since. Jackpine posted a record turnover of eighty million dollars in the first year of the new century. And Vinning is busier than ever in politics.

Ask anyone about the most prominent Sikhs of Canada, and Asa Johal's name invariably comes up. At the end of 2002, his Terminal Sawmills recorded an annual turnover of two hundred million dollars.

Sitting in a wicker chair in his posh Shaughnessy residence in South Vancouver, Asa Johal reluctantly discusses his business and charitable work. 'Yes, we have done very well in business. And we have done our bit for Vancouver's Children Hospital, the University of British Columbia and the India Cultural Centre of Canada. One should share one's good fortune with society.'

On an elevated platform in the room sits a picture showing Asa with the governor-general of Canada. 'In this picture I am being given the Order of Canada by the governor-general. That was in 1992. A year before I was given the Order of British Columbia,' says the multi-millionaire tycoon who didn't study beyond sixth standard in school.

Asa's father, Partap Singh, came to Canada from Jandiala village near Phagwara in Punjab in 1906. He went back to marry in 1919 and Asa was born in 1922.

'Back then, we were one of the three or four families to own a car. Things were going swimmingly when the Depression struck and blew away everything we owned. I was in school at the time,' he says matter-of-factly.

To support his family, fourteen-year-old Asa worked in sawmills. 'Within three years, I saved enough to start a fuel supply business. My company, Queensboro, earned me a thousand dollars a month from the start. Then I bought a pick-up truck to ferry fuel and hired people.'

In 1948, he left for India to marry Kashmir Kaur.

Asa returned in 1950 to restart the fuel supply business. 'But it failed. I thought of sawmills as an option. I had fifty thousand dollars, which I invested in a new venture which I named Terminal Sawmills.'

Things were on a roll. Asa made huge profits, and bought more sawmills. By 2002, Terminal Sawmills had many units, including sawmills, lumber plants and log sorting facilities.

His son, Darcy, also runs sawmills in Lithuania.

Herb Doman is Canada's first Sikh billionaire. And he started with 10 cents!

Herb says he was twelve when he lost his father. 'Since I was the eldest in the family, I dropped out of school to earn. I used to earn ten cents in those days,' recalls the septuagenarian Herb, standing on the steps of his hundred-acre picture-postcard mansion on Vancouver Island, with the Pacific Ocean and the Salt Spring Mountains providing the backdrop.

With an annual turnover of about one billion dollars in the year 2001, Doman Industries Limited is one of the largest forest products companies in Canada. 'We are a public limited



(Left): Herb Doman is the richest Sikh in Canada.

(Above): Rick Doman has stepped into his father's shoes.

company traded on the Toronto Stock Exchange, with high yield bonds in the US. We have sawmills, pulp mills, a lumber manufacturing plant and a log merchandiser,' says Herb Doman.

His products are sold all over the world, including India. 'We do a lot of pulp business with India through the Birlas who are our agents in Mumbai.' With more than five thousand employees, his group is also one of the biggest employers in Canada.

But how did it all begin?

Herb's father, Doman Singh, came from Paldi village in Punjab to Canada in 1905. 'He worked here for a few years and went back to India to get married in 1922. With my mother, Prabh Kaur, he returned to Canada in 1926. I was born here in 1932. My dad supplied labour to sawmills,' he says.

In 1944, his father died, leaving behind his wife, three sons — Herb, Gurdial and Didar — and two daughters — Harbans Kaur and Mohinder Kaur. Young Herb, being the eldest, dropped out of school and a few years later began to drive a fuel supply truck.

With his savings, he bought a pick-up truck and got into the freight business. It grew by leaps and bounds. In 1955, Doman Industries Ltd came into being. It saw phenomenal success. 'From hauling lumber, copper ore and fuel, we expanded to become a public carrier in 1964,' he says. Doman kept branching into new areas: building material, lumber yards and sawmills. 'In the mid-sixties, our sales reached six million dollars. In 1967, our first sawmill at Ladysmith went on stream,' says his wife, Harjinder Kaur.

As his business flourished, so did his reputation. Doman befriended the late Premier W.A.C. Bennett and, later, his son Bill. He was offered the post of Lt.-Governor of British Columbia, but he declined.

Plugging into his Indian connection, he says he served on the board of directors of the State Bank of India. 'In 1975, I met Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. She asked me to invest in India, but there were lots of duties.'

His success formula: Good business ethics and respect for employees.

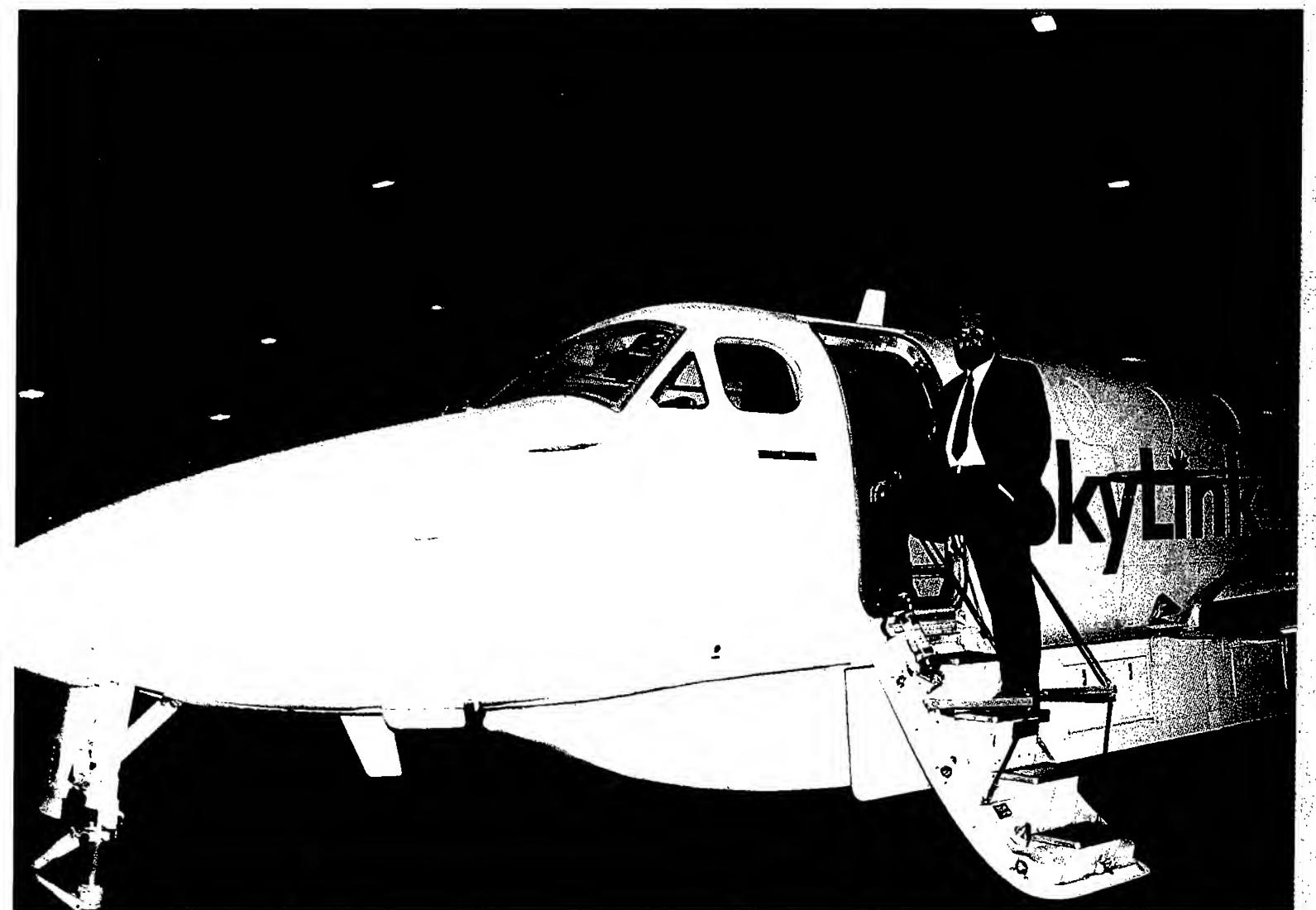
His role models: His father and Lee Iacocca. 'My father taught me the value of hard work, and Lee Iacocca has a passion for success.'

'I am committed to taking my dad's empire to higher levels,' says his son, Rick (Jaspaul), who is the CEO and president of the group.

The history of Canadian Sikhs will be incomplete without mentioning the name of Mayo Singh. He was the first Sikh millionaire in Canada.

Explaining Mayo's story, his son, Rajinder Singh, says, 'Mayo (Mahiya) Singh and Doman Singh were among the first twenty-one Sikhs from Paldi, Mahilpur and Kharaundi villages in Punjab to come to Canada in 1905.

'At sixteen, Mayo (my dad) was too young to handle heavy sawmill work. So he cooked for the group that had leased a sawmill in Westminster. He hired one Clarence Evan to teach him English. When the sawmill lease expired, Mayo and his group started looking for work.



(Top): Skylink's Surjit Singh Babra poses in front of a plane.

(Above): Babra with his friends.

They saw an ad about a sawmill on Vancouver Island being on sale, and sent Mayo to negotiate. They bought the sawmill and named it after their native Paldi.'

As per sawmill records, Mayo got sixty-five dollars per month, Kapoor Singh sixty-one dollars and Doman Singh forty-five dollars.

'When the immigrants got the right to bring in their families, all except dad and Kapoor sold their shares and left. By 1928, dad and Kapoor owned three mills. They split in 1932. Dad re-named his company Mayo Lumber Company. When he died in 1955, dad was a respected millionaire. He received Pandit Nehru when he visited British Columbia. He contributed generously to charities, hospitals and universities. Dad was a trailblazer,' says Rajinder Singh.

Toronto's Surjit Babra is yet another trailblazer. His *Skylink* flies peacekeeping missions to the volatile zones of the world.

Leaning on a desk in his Toronto office, a nattily dressed Babra says, 'We are not a usual commercial airline. We are a standby that responds to the UN or governmental requests to ferry men and material to war zones. During the Cambodia crisis, we flew relief for over six months. Our helicopters sustained more than four hundred bullet holes in the operations.'

It all began in 1988 when *Skylink* entered into its first contract with the UN to fly five missions from Tel Aviv to Kathmandu. 'The success spurred me to get into this business in a big way,' he says.

*Skylink* has lease agreements for copters and aircraft. 'We bid for UN contracts. When we are sounded, we get our planes ready, activate satellite-and-phone systems and fly.' *Skylink* was lauded for its work for the Canadian Armed Forces in 1994 when it airlifted medical relief and peacekeeping supplies to Rwanda.

As Babra says, he learnt the tricks of the trade while working with a travel agency in London in the '70s. 'I moved to Toronto and set about starting *Skylink*.'

Headquartered in Toronto, *Skylink* has branch offices in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Montreal, Vancouver and Washington. The group operates four divisions — *Skylink Travel*, *Skylink Aviation*, *Skylink Express* and *Dollar Rent-a-Car* — and has hundreds on its staff.

The soft-spoken Babra lives in the posh Richmond Hill area of Toronto with his wife, Kanwaljit, daughters Gagandeep and Manpreet, and son Pritpal.

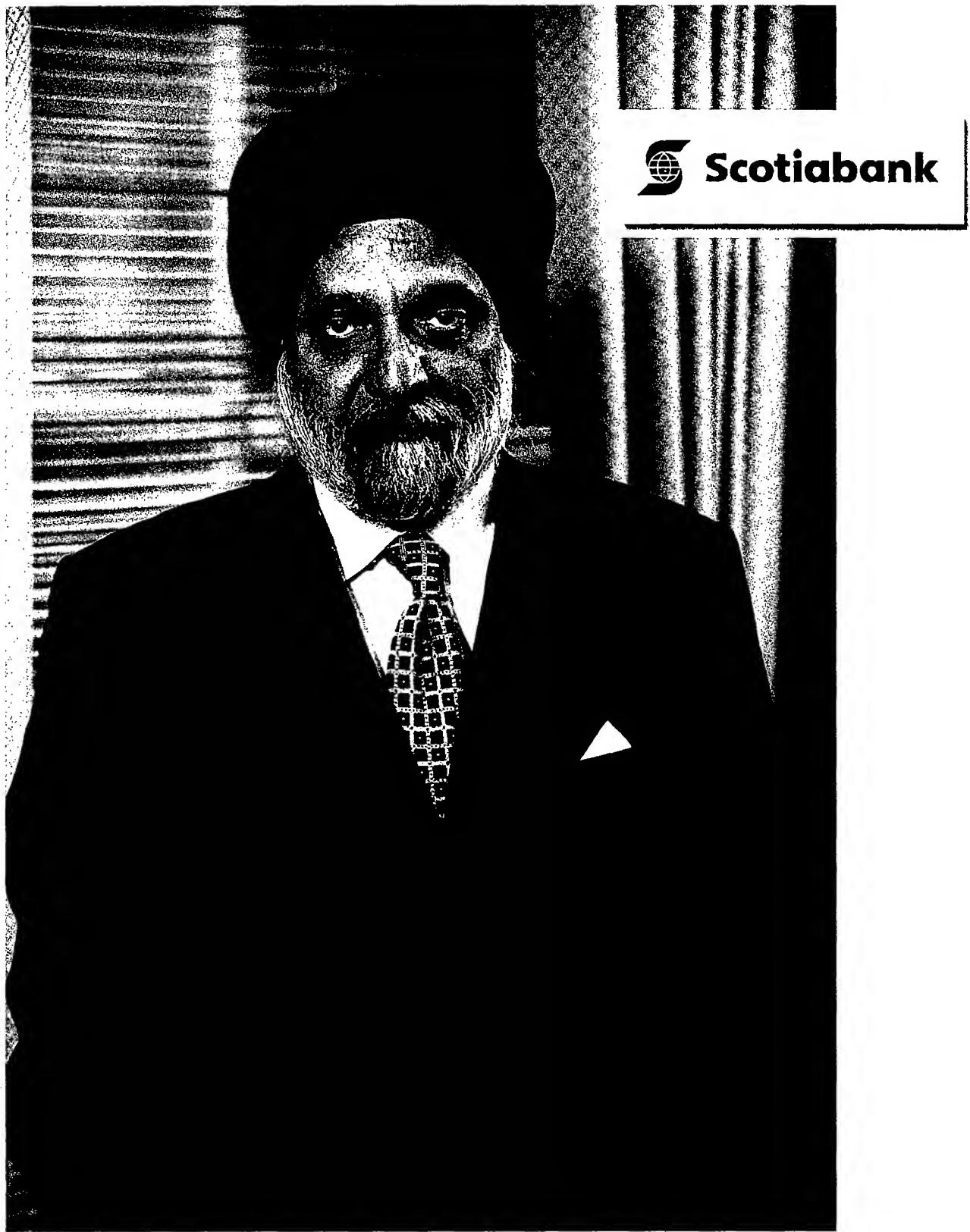
A driven man, Babra says he believes in motivational psychology.

His favourite book: Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

His greatest achievement: The inclusion of a *Skylink* profile in school textbooks in Ontario.

Many Canadian Sikhs have made their mark in the corporate world. Sabi Marwah leads the pack.

As senior executive vice-president of Scotiabank — Canada's second largest bank, with branches in more than fifty countries — Marwah ranks high in the hierarchy. 'Yes, sort of. I



Corporate wizard Sabi Marwah in his Scotiabank office in downtown Toronto.

am also the Bank's chief financial officer. I look after many operations, including budgeting, forecasting, financial analysis, mergers and acquisitions,' he says modestly.

For his high standing in the corporate world, Sabi was given the Professional of the Year Award by the Indo-Canada Chamber of Commerce in 1994. The Centennial Foundation feted him in 1998.

Born in Calcutta in 1952, Marwah did his schooling at the local St Xavier's School. 'I can speak decent Bengali... *tumi bhalo aachho*,' he laughs. Moving to Delhi in 1970, he enrolled in St. Stephen's College for his Masters. 'For my Ph.D., I joined the Delhi School of Economics.'

His next destination was the University of California in Los Angeles. 'I wanted to do an MBA to enter the financial world.'

Armed with an MBA, he landed in Toronto in 1978 and joined Scotiabank as a financial analyst. The rest, as they say, is history.

Father of two daughters named Nanaki and Gurbani, this busy banker has made an immense contribution to social causes. He was instrumental in his bank's huge contribution to the *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms Exhibition* in Toronto in 1999.

From *Skylink* headquarters to Canaccord Capital Corp on Bay Street in downtown Toronto is a short distance.

In the swanky offices of Canaccord sits another high-profile Sikh: Gary Singh. He is Canaccord's vice-president and its second largest shareholder.

Pleasantries over, Gary Singh says, 'Canaccord is Canada's biggest non-banking financial institution, with a billion-dollar turnover in 2002. We are a full-service retail and institutional brokerage as well as a banking firm with offices in Canada and overseas.'

The affable Gary Singh is a quintessential society man. Not a day goes by when he does not chair the meeting of a board or committee or trust. He also serves on various social, political, educational and charitable boards, including the Sikh Foundation of Canada and the Eye Foundation of Canada.

In Toronto, he is known for hosting fundraisers, dinners and gala shows.

When an earthquake struck Gujarat in January 2001, he responded swiftly by putting together an ad hoc committee that raised about two million dollars. Because of his connections, he got the quantum of the Canadian government's quake relief fund raised from one million dollars to ten million dollars. 'Initially, Canada had announced one million dollars. I requested Minister of International Cooperation and Development Maria Minna that the amount was too little. She first raised the amount to three, then to five and finally to ten million dollars,' he says.

During the Khalsa tercentenary celebrations in 1999, Gary Singh played the lead role in raising 1.2 million dollars to bring to Toronto the *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms Exhibition* from London's Victoria and Albert Museum.



(Top): Society man Gary Singh and his wife, Jeetee Singh, with Paul Martin.

(Left): Gary Singh and his wife with Canadian Heritage Minister Sheila Copps and former Ontario Premier David Peterson.

'When we approached the Royal Ontario Museum to hold the exhibition, it demanded six hundred thousand dollars. I, as chairman of the organizing committee, told the Sikh community that it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to show the Canadian people our glorious past. Thanks to Hon'ble Minister Herb Dhaliwal, I was able to get 125,000 dollars from the Federal Government. Raminder Gill, Ontario MPP, helped us get an equal contribution from the Provincial Government. Corporates too chipped in, with my own Canaccord Corp donating seventy-five thousand dollars,' says Gary Singh.

For his services, Gary Singh was awarded the Commemorative Medal on the 125th anniversary of the Canadian Confederation in 1993, and included in the governor-general's entourage to India in 1998.

Gary Singh's journey from India to Canada is full of drama.

Born in Kila Raipur near Ludhiana to an Army officer in 1948, Gary (Gurdass) Singh did his BA from Panjab University, Chandigarh, followed by an MA in English Literature and a Bachelor of Education.

In 1972, he landed at Toronto airport with a handful of dollars, but a pocketful of dreams. 'I didn't know a soul in Toronto, and spent my first night on the airport bench.'

He accepted the first job he found as a security guard for \$1.65 an hour. After saving enough money in two years, Gary Singh enrolled for the MBA programme at McGill University in Montreal. 'However, I ran out of money after two years and came back to Toronto to serve as a private investigator. My job involved chasing cheating husbands, wives and hookers. On the side, I pursued part-time courses. Then I went back to Montreal to complete my MBA course,' says the self-made corporate man.

Joining Merit Investment as an analyst trainee, Gary Singh eventually became a broker. As he accumulated stock in the company, Gary Singh was appointed its senior vice-president in the '80s. When Canaccord acquired Merit in 1996, he became its vice-president. He is married to Jeetee Singh, who is a member of the prestigious Immigration and Refugee Board. They have two sons named Chiranjeev and Jaipal.

Milton, in Toronto, is home to Tiger Jeet Singh. Strolling on their hundred-acre ranch in sub-zero temperatures, Tiger Jeet Singh and his son, Tiger Ali Singh of WWF fame, exude raw strength.

Jeet Singh, who was nicknamed Tiger by his Australian coach Fred Atkins, was known for his wrestling exploits in the '60s and '70s. He made his trademark Punjabi dress world famous.

A proud Indian, Tiger Jeet Singh always entered the arena with the Indian national flag and sang the Indian national anthem before every bout. Today, he is a UN Goodwill Ambassador and an icon in Japan where he goes on promotional tours for Universal Music every month. 'I have promotional contracts with Universal and other companies in Japan. I am featured in films, comics and advertisements. I have just cut a CD in Japanese for Universal. My Tiger-label clothing line sells well in Japan,' he says.



(Top): World famous wrestler Tiger Jeet Singh (left) with his son Tiger Ali Singh, the first Asian face on WWF.

(Right): Tigers' mansion outside Toronto.

Jeet Singh came to Canada as a teenager with his father in 1963. The sixteen-year-old lad took to body building and wrestling at the local YMCA. 'Within a year my weight went up from 150 pounds to 200 pounds. I felt I could beat anyone. So I challenged Jim Hadi of Hungary for an arm-wrestling bout during a TV interview.'

Tiger was mauled by Hadi in three minutes!

'But the defeat made me only more determined to become a world champion,' he says, caressing his rippling muscles.

Tiger realized his dream in 1971 when his trainer Fred Atkins pitted him against the then US champion Johnny Valentine.

Tiger made short work of Johnny. 'I picked him up and banged him into the pole. He got thirty-five stitches, and I got five hundred dollars.'

Sponsors made a beeline for the young champion. Tiger travelled to Australia, Hong Kong and Japan. 'But Japan fascinated me the most. The Japanese are crazy about wrestling and they call me Tiger saan,' he laughs.

Indeed, his wild ways once got him into a free-for-all when he slapped the wife of the famous Japanese wrestler Anokhi. She had made some derogatory remarks about Tiger's Punjabi dress. 'I responded with a slap on her face. In a minute, all hell broke loose. I suffered broken bones. A case was registered against me.'

But the matter was sorted out, and Jeet Singh was back in Japan.

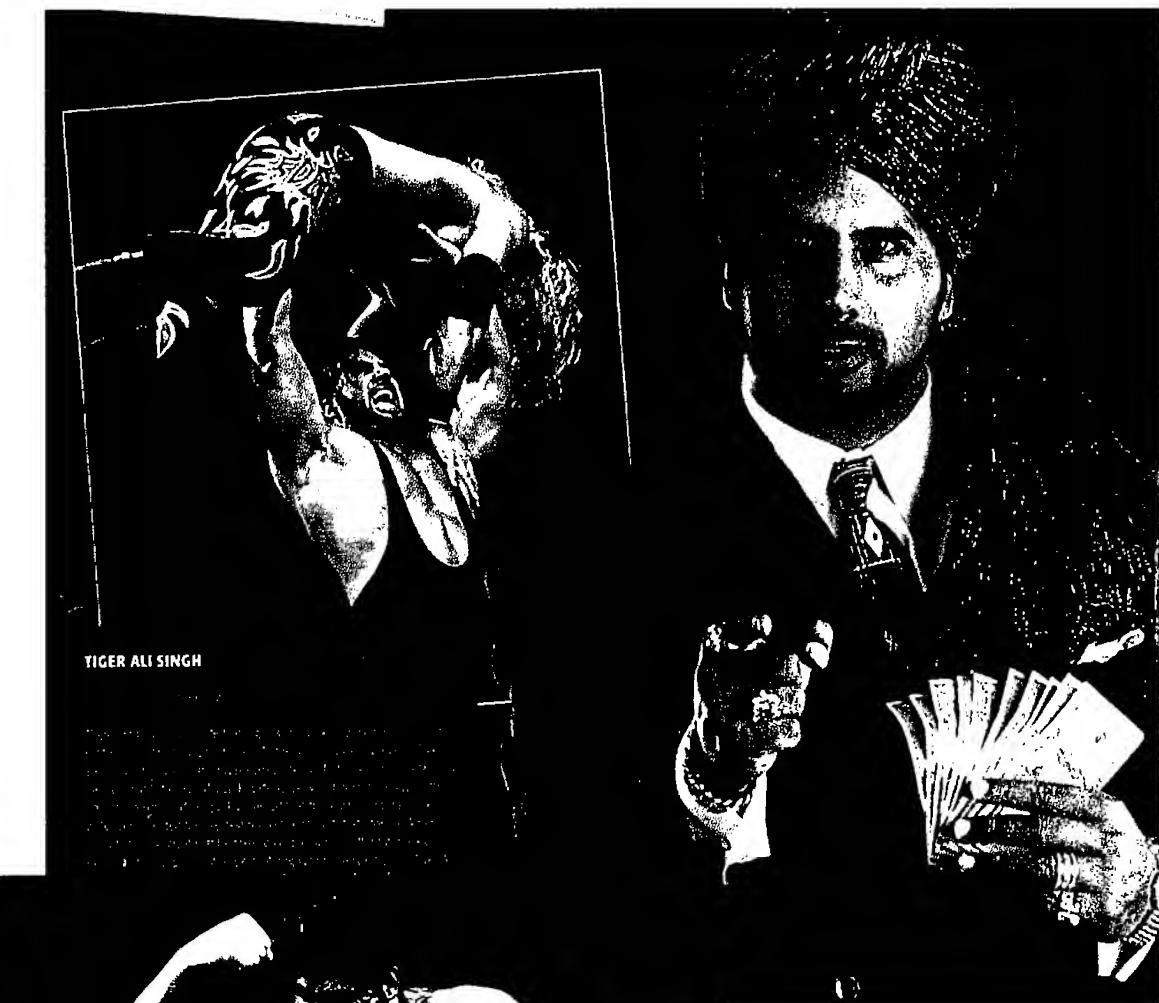
A few years ago, he says, the Japanese gave him a small island to develop as a tourist spot.

Following in Tiger Jeet Singh's footsteps is his son Tiger Ali Singh, who has conquered the WWF arena. Standing at six feet and six inches, Tiger Ali Singh became the first Asian face on WWF. 'WWF chairman Vince McMahon picked me up because of my pedigree and ethnic background. He wants wrestlers from different ethnic backgrounds on his show to make it appealing all over the globe. WWF is watched in 170 countries by over a billion people, and I was voted the most recognizable Asian face on WWF in a survey,' says Tiger Ali Singh, who has signed a multi-million dollar contract with WWF and done commercials for Ford.

Nicknamed Mika, Tiger Ali Singh got the 'Ali' tag from the legendary Muhammad Ali. Says his dad, 'Ali is a good friend of mine. As he has only daughters, Ali wanted someone to carry his name. I agreed to change my son's name from Tiger Jeet Singh Jr. to Tiger Ali Singh. No change of religion. When a king from the Middle East asked my son to drop "Singh" from his name, he refused. He even refused to accept a top-of-the-line car as a gift.'

If the father was famous for his wild ways, Tiger Ali Singh was voted "the most popular person to hate" by WWF viewers some time ago.

Says Ali Singh, 'Because of my ethnic background, I am the ultimate bad guy for American viewers. I retaliate by saying how Asians and Indians are superior to miserable Americans, how Indians worship God and their parents while the Americans worship only the dollar.'



(Top): Tiger Ali Singh holding aloft an opponent in a bout (left), and in his traditional Sikh gear (right).

(Left): Tiger Ali Singh pummeling an opponent.

His antics included offering dollars to any American willing to lick his shoes.

Not surprisingly, Tiger Ali Singh was voted “the most popular guy to hate”. Death threats followed. The police had to mount a helicopter vigil on the Tiger family’s Toronto estate.

Young Tiger Ali Singh attributes his success to strong family values and the Sikh religion. ‘I have a great dad, and a great religion. In showbiz, you can easily get lost. Strong values and faith give you a proper perspective.’

The Tigers also run a chain of hotels: Days Inn, Comfort Inn Suites, Best Inn and Owen Sound Inn.

Talking of sports, many Sikh hockey players, including Sami Chauhan and his son, have represented Canada at the international level. Skater Emanuel Sandhu and boxer Pardeep Nagra are other well-known Sikh names in Canadian sport.

Sandhu, who was trained at the National Ballet School, is Canada’s foremost skater and national champion in figure skating.

Toronto’s lightweight boxer Pardeep Singh Nagra fought not only his opponents in the ring, but also outside it as the Canadian Amateur Boxing Association initially refused him permission to take part in boxing because of his beard.

But Nagra won that round.

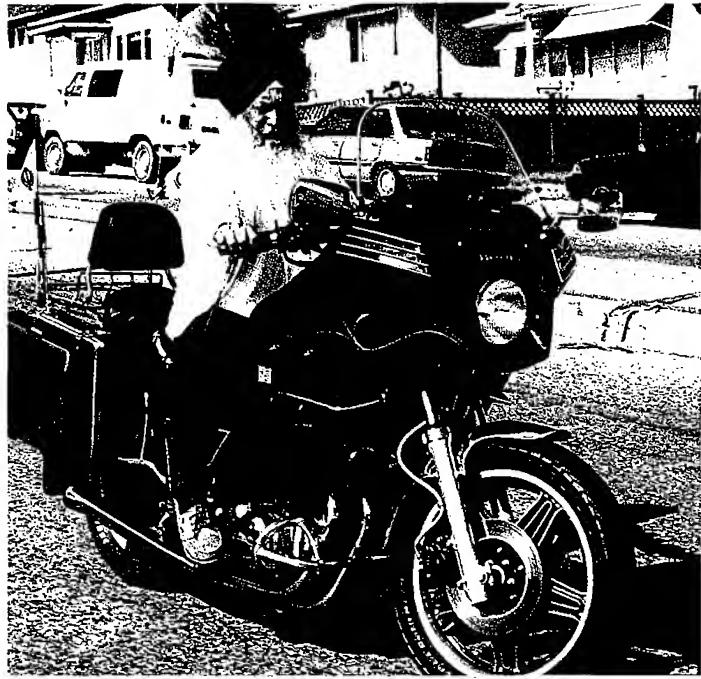
‘The cases of discrimination give us wonderful opportunities to educate the mainstream community about Sikhs,’ says Toronto’s celebrated lawyer, T. Sher Singh. In January 2002, he became the first turbaned Sikh to get the Order of Canada.

T. Sher Singh adds, ‘The issues of turban and beard cropped up as the community’s desire to join the mainstream increased. Lots of people may say: Who wants to become a driver or a policeman? But that’s not the issue. The issue is that you fight every discrimination so that you keep the threshold away. There is growing Sikh activism in Canada. We have fought many cases and won every time. So, when stories of the turban issue, etc., appear in India, they are often misread as discrimination against the Sikhs. On the contrary, these are signs that the community is thriving in Canada. It is a country where anyone can challenge the government and win.’

The gutsy lawyer from Guelph near Toronto hit the headlines in 1990 when he took on the then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to court for appointing former Nova Scotia Premier John Buchanan to the Senate, while the latter was under investigation for a fraud. ‘Mulroney had done a few things which were not only unpopular, but also illegal,’ he says.

A survey at the time showed that ninety-eight per cent of the people in his town backed T. Sher Singh. ‘Ultimately, the resentment against the prime minister boiled over. He was thrown out of power, and his party reduced to just two seats in parliament,’ says T. Sher Singh, who moved to Canada from Patna in 1971.

In October 1999, he represented Canadian Sikhs at the third millennium celebrations of Christianity in the Vatican where he presented a four-foot tall, 150-pound bronze sculpture



(Top): Decorated with the Order of Canada, the gutsy lawyer T. Sher Singh with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican.

(Above left): Avtar Singh Dhillon who won the battle against the helmet.

(Above right): Jagdeep Singh was the first turbaned Sikh to join the Air Force in 1997.

(Right): Royal Canadian Mounted Police's first turbaned Sikh officer Baltej Singh Dhillon.

to the Pope. A regular columnist for *The Toronto Star*, T. Sher Singh, with his daughter Gehna Singh, also does two weekly TV programmes: *Sat Sri Akal* and *Conversations*.

While bestowing the Order of Canada on him, the government said, ‘T. Sher Singh has demonstrated through his vast record of public service how a vibrant multi-cultural landscape serves to enrich our nation. A prominent member of the Sikh-Canadian community, he is an advocate for the importance of positive race relations... He has become a symbol of the importance of mediation, listening and understanding as tools to bridge different segments of our society.’

Modest to the core, the suave Sikh reciprocates, ‘The award is a tribute to Canadian society. It has no ceilings. Everyone has participated in nation-building, and the Sikhs have contributed way beyond their numbers.’

Constable Baltej Dhillon will always be mentioned in the history of Canadian Sikhs. In 1990, he “turbaned” his way into the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). His case grabbed nationwide attention, stirred racial prejudices and ended in a blow for Canadian multi-culturalism.

He is the first turbaned Sikh in the RCMP.

Narrating his case in pouring rain in Vancouver, he says, ‘My fight for the right to wear turban was the worst period of my life. Threats were made against me. But I thank God for putting me in that role.’ On a philosophical note, he adds, ‘Struggles make you stronger. If you just walk through the open door, you will not appreciate that you are in the room. But if you have to force the door open, you will appreciate the fact. Shoot for the stars.’

Dhillon moved to Canada from Malaysia in 1983.

‘I was sixteen then and came to Vancouver to join my brother. I worked on farms to raise my school fee. Then I enrolled for a law course, which required me to work as a volunteer with the police during the summer vacation. I liked that role and decided to join the police. But when I made inquiries in 1985, I was told that the RCMP didn’t allow a turban,’ he says.

Nevertheless, he sent in his application and wrote the test in 1988. His name was put on the waiting list while the RCMP deliberated over his case.

‘More than 250,000 people petitioned the RCMP against me. I faced racist comments. I gave interviews on TV and radio to educate people about Sikhs.’

Finally, the decks were cleared for him when parliament accepted the RCMP’s recommendation on turban. He joined the RCMP in August 1990. But his troubles did not end. ‘When I went for training at Regina, people sent threatening letters. When I got my first posting at Quesnel, a town of 35,000, I faced racism. But my bosses were very supportive,’ he says.

Yet another Dhillon — Avtar Singh — fought and won the right for Sikhs to wear a turban while driving motorcycles in 1999. His case dragged on for more than two decades.



(Left): President and CEO of Mainstreet Equity Corporation which is listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange and whose worth is 200 million dollars, Calgary-based Navjeet (Bob) Dhillon is probably the biggest Sikh landlord in Canada, owning more than 2,400 units spread from Lower Mainland in British Columbia to Missisauga in Ontario. An MBA from the famous Richard Ivey School of Business, Bob is also the president of the Pan Pacific Mercantile Group which exports Tabasco brand products to south Asia. In addition, he is also the honorary consul of Belize where he is building a 2,300-acre island as a tourist resort. Born in Hong Kong, Bob is related to Kewal Dhillon who bottles Pepsi in north India.



(Above): Gurdev Sandhu of Vancouver has been rated as a top realtor in British Columbia.

Says Avtar Singh, who came to Vancouver in 1970, 'In August 1971, I got a job with a construction company which insisted that I wear a helmet. When I refused, I was fired. In 1974, I got another job and was fired for the same reason.'

He went to court, but lost.

His driving licence was impounded. Avtar Singh approached political leaders, but in vain. In 1994, he moved the Human Rights Commission of Canada, which held open hearings and accepted the turban as an article of faith. The government had no choice but to change the law.

Jagdeep Singh, who joined the Canadian Air Force in 1997, is the first turbanned Sikh to get the Queen's Commission in the air force. 'I am proud that my son broke yet another ceiling,' says his father, Sukhdev Singh Dardi, who edits Vancouver's biweekly *Sangharsh*.

Speaking about ceiling-breakers, RCMP's Ajit Kaur Tiwana is the first South Asian woman to don the police uniform anywhere in the West.

Patrolling the drug-prone Burnaby area of Vancouver, the tall constable says, 'Yes, I faced prejudice. But if you are qualified and determined, you can get over any hurdle. I knew I had to prove myself a lot more than others. During training, I had a lot of people calling me names because of my colour and ethnic background, but you have to disregard these people and get on with the job. I was not going to stand that nonsense.'

Married to a fellow French-Canadian officer, Ajit came to Canada from Bhopal in 1980 to pursue a university degree in criminology and psychology. Why did she opt for the police?

'My dad was in the Bihar Regiment, so I gravitated towards the uniform,' she says. Her entry into the RCMP in 1987 drew a huge response from the community. 'I had all sorts of people come up to me and congratulate me. Old women would hold my hand and say: *bahut changa kita puttar* (Well done, daughter),' she says with pride.

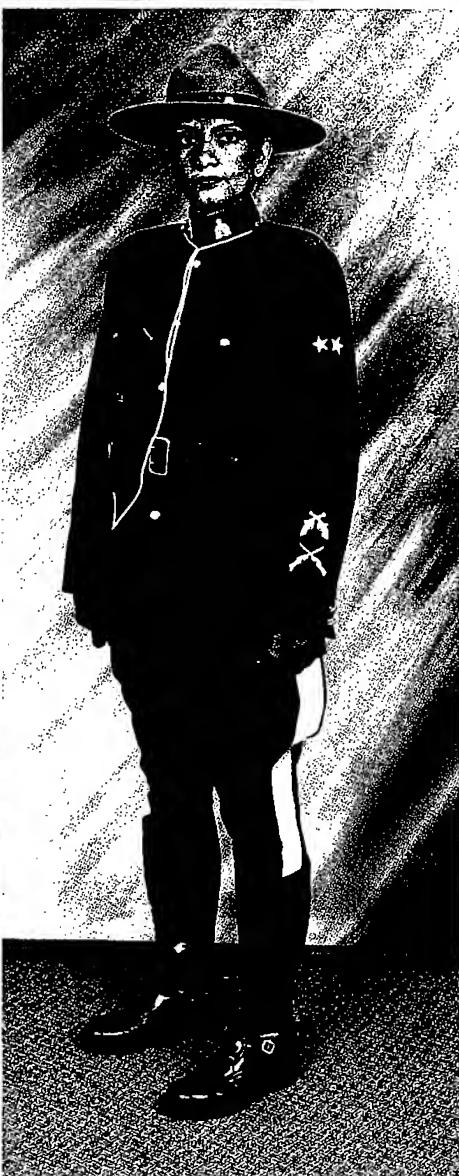
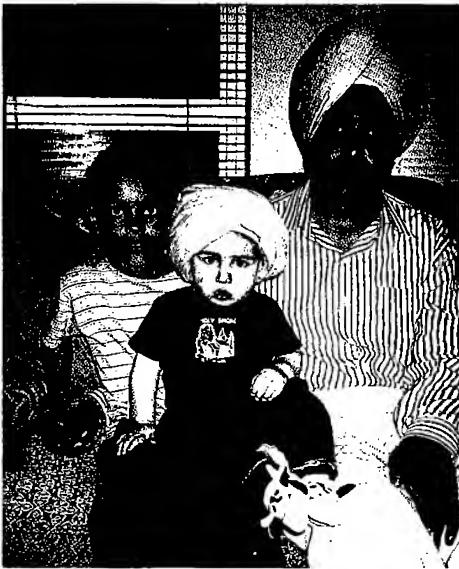
A great admirer of India's woman supercop Kiran Bedi, she too is a no nonsense officer. 'There have been occasions when I found myself in a tight situation. Once when I went in to disentangle some brawling men, I had one guy coming straight towards me with a bottle in his hand. I pinned him down and handcuffed him before my colleagues arrived on the spot,' she says.

As a Sikh, Ajit feels uneasy about some aspects of the community. 'There have been cases where married men have gone to India and re-married. When those girls come here, they go through hell. Back in India, many families think of these marriages as passports to Canada,' she says.

At dusk, she puts on her gear and sets off on her round. All alone.

The best compliment for Ajit comes from Justice Wallace Oppal of the British Columbia Supreme Court. 'She is an enviable police officer,' he says.

Oppal too is the envy of many. He is the first Sikh judge to make it to the Supreme Court.



(Top left): National skater Emanuel Sandhu.  
Photo courtesy: *Vancouver Sun*.

(Top right): Journalist Kulvinder Kular.

(Right): Ajit Kaur Tiwana was the first South Asian woman to join the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1987.

(Below): Tiwana on a patrol.



Sitting in his third-floor chamber on Smithe Street in downtown Vancouver, Justice Oppal is busy clearing a pile of papers. 'We don't keep anything pending,' he says.

'I know there are millions of cases pending in Indian courts. I was there in 1998, sat in the Mumbai High Court and offered Canada's help to streamline the legal system,' he says.

Born in 1940, Oppal was a renowned lawyer before he was elevated to the Supreme Court in 1985. Says Oppal, 'I am the first Sikh judge in the Supreme Court, though we have Harbans Dhillon and Balwinder Sandhu in provincial courts.'

He ascribes his success to being at the right place, at the right time. 'Your profile also matters. I had taken up many important cases, and appeared for the attorney general as a special prosecutor,' he says.

Oppal headed the Royal Commission on Police Reforms in 1994. He travelled to South Africa, Australia, the US and Hong Kong before submitting his report. Called *Closing the Gap*, the report made 222 recommendations on police reform.

As a lawman, does he still see discrimination in Canada? 'It cannot be entirely rooted out. But we have come a long way from the days when they won't allow us to bring in our families and join professions like law. Things are changing fast. Who knows the minorities may become a majority in fifty years' time? Already, Vancouver and Toronto have visible minorities which constitute about forty to fifty per cent of the population.'

Married to Connie, Justice Oppal is actively involved in the affairs of the Sikh community.

Equally involved in Sikh matters is scholar Raghbir Singh Bains, who created the *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* on a CD-ROM.

Released in 1997 by Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, this was the world's first-ever encyclopaedia on CD. 'Even the Britannica CD-ROM came out later,' he says, sitting in his book-lined study in Surrey.

The CD, launched in India by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, took fifteen years to complete and cost him upward of \$200,000. 'It has 20,000 pages which make 160 hours of reading. Divided into adult and children sections, it touches 3,500 topics. With a click, you can access text, audio, video and graphics,' explains Bains, who is also a reputed expert on drug and alcohol abuse.

Bains sold a part of his property to pay for the project and travelled to thirty-one countries to gather information.

Awarded with the Order of the Khalsa in 1999, the Panth Rattan in 2001, and the Good Citizen of Surrey in 2002, Bains has held youth orientation camps in dozens of countries. Senior University International of Wyoming in the US conferred the 'degree of philosophy' on him in August 2002 for his work on Sikhism and world cultures.

Says Bains, 'The youth are a confused lot today. I regularly visit my native Punjab to hold drug seminars. Today, ninety per cent of people in Punjab use drugs or alcohol or tobacco. Tobacco alone kills 25,000 people in Punjab every year. The British introduced liquor culture



(Top left): Dr Raghbir Bains (second from right), who created *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* on a CD-ROM, being honoured by the Akal Takht Jathedar (left).

(Left): Dr Bains receiving the Good Citizen Award for the year 2002 from Surrey mayor Doug McCallum (left).

(Top right): Wallace Oppal is the first Sikh judge in the British Columbian Supreme Court.

(Below): Harbans Dhillon is the first Sikh woman judge in a Provincial Court in British Columbia.



in Punjab by giving free liquor to the Sikh soldiers going home on leave. The habit spread. Today, the Sikhs take pride in consuming liquor, although it was forbidden by the Gurus. In 2002, there were more than 8,500 liquor shops in Punjab.'

According to Montreal-based Baljit Chadha, who in February 2003 was appointed to the Security Intelligence Review Committee, the future of Canadian Sikhs lies in political consolidation and cultural exchanges with other communities in the Canadian mosaic. Towards this end, many public-spirited Sikhs, including Chadha, set up the Canadian Sikh Council in 2001. The council is already credited with the introduction of an undergraduate course, 'Introduction to Sikhism,' at the famous McGill University in Montreal.

Chadha came to Canada as a twenty-one-year-old student from Bombay in 1973. He founded Balcorp Limited in 1976 with borrowed money and a single desk lent by a relative. 'Today, we are one of the few well-established trading houses in Quebec. We are involved in international marketing of agri-food products, processed foods, forestry products and minerals,' says Chadha.

Involved in community affairs since the early 1980s, Baljit Chadha and his wife, Roshi, set up the Chadha Family Foundation in the early 1990s to follow the family tradition of "seva and charity."

The foundation has established permanent endowments, totalling \$500,000, at McGill and Concordia universities to provide bursaries worth \$25,000 each year. 'We also contributed \$35,000 to the *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms Exhibition* held in Toronto,' says Chadha, whose family has performed 'seva' at the Golden Temple in Amritsar for generations.

Broadcaster, poet and singer Kuldeep Deepak is the culture-keeper of the Sikh community in Toronto. He was the first to start a Punjabi radio programme called *Punjab Di Goonj* in 1977. 'It is Canada's longest-running Punjabi programme,' says Kuldeep, who moved to Canada in 1974.

Like his compatriots, he came here for a better future and became a systems analyst. 'But poetry was in my blood. So, I started this one-hour weekly programme in 1977. The aim was to keep Punjab alive in Canada. It was tough being a broadcaster in those days. There were just ten Punjabi shops, and each sponsored me to the tune of twenty-five dollars,' he recalls. The programme is now broadcast on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Kuldeep is the first Indian singer ever to be recorded in North America. 'That was a Punjabi album way back in 1979. It had four songs by Shiv Batalvi and drummed up a huge response,' he muses, fine-tuning his guitar in the basement studio of his Mississauga residence. Passionate about Shiv Batalvi's poetry, he sings it to the accompaniment of a guitar!

'A few years ago when I went on stage with a guitar, people thought I might be a rock'n'roll guy. But when I started singing Shiv Batalvi, they just could not believe,' he laughs.

Till now, Kuldeep had done nine albums, all of which have Batalvi's songs. 'Batalvi's themes are pain, sorrow, world peace, revolution, nature and women,' says Kuldeep who has also done an album — *Asi Joban Rute* — with ghazal maestro Jagjit Singh.



(Top): Montreal-based Baljit Chadha, who serves on the Security Intelligence Review Committee, with his wife Roshi.

(Above left): As associate director of the Peel Board of Education, Harinder Takhar has done his utmost to promote education among Sikhs.

(Right): Kuldip Deepak, who started the first Punjabi programme in Canada in 1977, sings Shiv Batalvi with guitar.

Strumming his guitar, he says, 'The concerns of the Sikh community have changed over the years. We are at a crossroads. The older generation is too set in its ways. The younger generation is lost and doesn't accept its heritage. And they know the Whites will never accept them. This identity crisis is manifesting itself in many ways. There is a generation gap.'

*Eye On Asia*, a television show hosted by Toronto-based Darshan Sahota and his daughter, Arvinder, is an attempt to bridge this gap. The father and daughter sit next to each other, with Darshan speaking in Punjabi and Hindi, and the daughter speaking in English. 'That's the typical state of affairs in most Indo-Canadian homes,' says Ranjan Chhiber of Ottawa, who is a professor of film studies at George Washington University's School of Media and Public Affairs.

Two Toronto-based broadcasters who have made it big are CNN's Monita Rajpal and Satinder Bindra.

Satinder moved to Toronto in 1989 after finishing his M.Phil from Oxford. 'I wanted to be where the action is, i.e., North America.'

He first worked with the Canadian Press and wrote for *India Today*. 'When *India Today* launched its North American edition, I was on the original team. My aim was to keep my Indian connection,' he says.

Moving on to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), he soon began covering international news. Then CTV roped him in to start their first digital television station in Vancouver. 'But within a year, I felt edgy and started pitching for CNN.'

In March 1999, he was on the CNN bandwagon. Originally assigned to Delhi, he was moved to Kosovo where he reported live from the war front for forty-five days. He had hardly landed in Delhi from Kosovo when Kargil happened.

Afghanistan was his third war assignment. He was the only correspondent to report live the fall of Kunduz to the Northern Alliance. 'The letter K has a special significance for me: Kosovo, Kargil, Kabul and Kunduz...', he says with a smile.

Born in Neemuch (India), Satinder is a product of Delhi Public School, Don Bosco and St Stephen's College — where designer Rohit Bal was his classmate.

Monita, whose family moved to Toronto from Hong Kong in 1988, worked with CTV before joining CNN. Extremely proud of her Sikh background, she says, 'I was taught to be proud of my heritage. Just look at the beauty and history of my culture.'

As the new millennium unfolds, what does the future hold for Canadian Sikhs? 'We have a bright future in Canada. Our people already hold high positions. The next generation is set to become part of the mainstream,' says Vancouver-based Amarjeet Rattan who served as Canada's consul and trade commissioner in Mumbai till 2002.

Chips in *Vancouver Sun* journalist Kim Bolan who has covered Sikh affairs for two decades, 'Apart from a few isolated acts like the 1985 Air India bombing which changed the history of



(Top): CNN's Satinder Bindra in the newsroom in Atlanta .

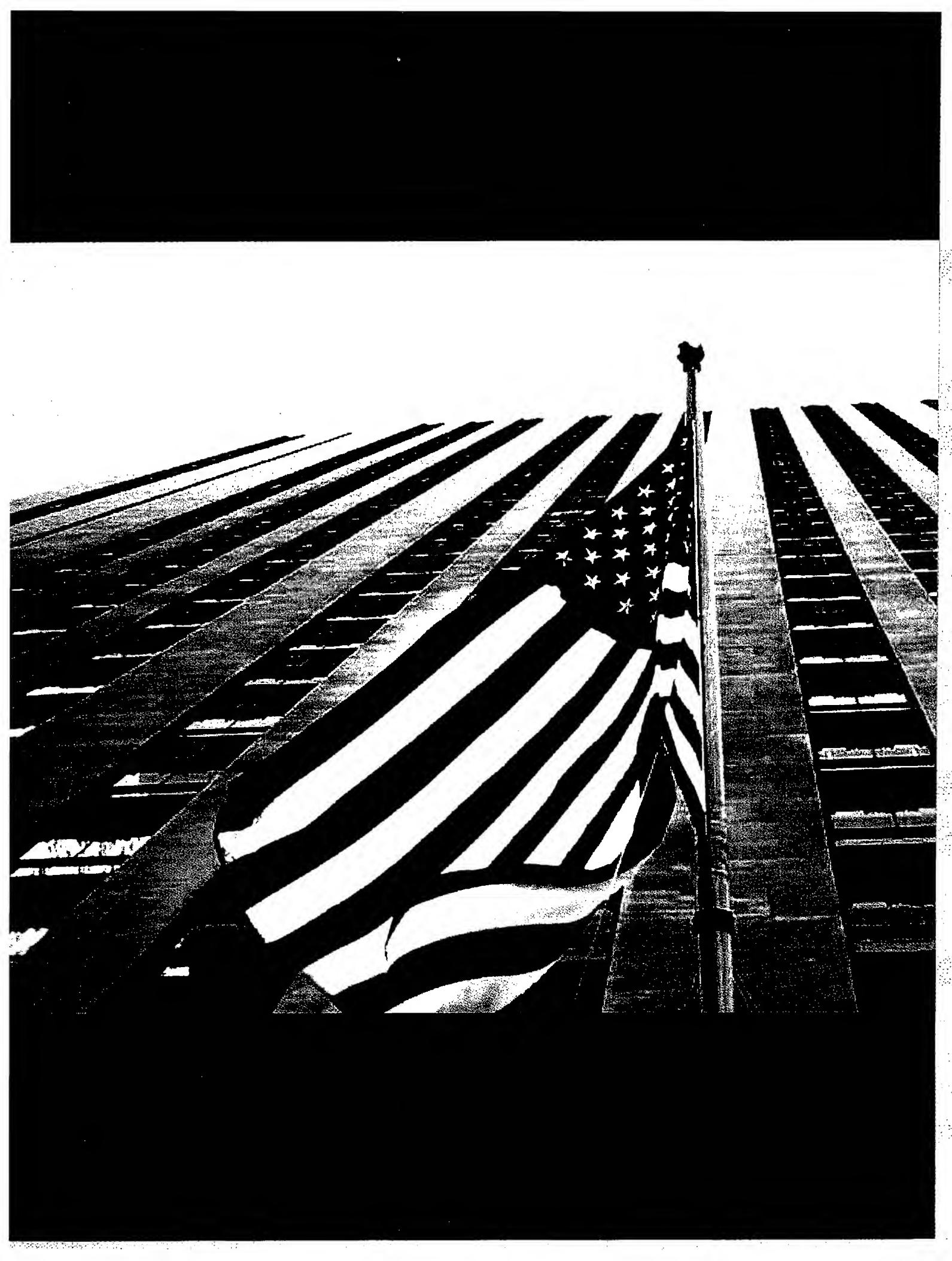
(Above left): CNN's newscaster Monita Rajpal comes from Toronto.

(Above right): Jalandhar-born Monika Deol is the most familiar Sikh face on TV in Canada. Host of City-Pulse Tonight and Iconoclast on Channel 13, Monika came into broadcasting after a stint as disc jockey with her own band Perfect Kiss.

this country and the community forever, the Sikh community has attained respect through hard work and innovation. They have a great future in this country.'

Adds Ujjal Dosanjh, 'Though we have done very well in different fields, we lack in one area. The Canadian Sikhs will be a complete community only when they produce writers, poets and philosophers. They need thinkers in their ranks.'

That time does not seem too far off.



# AMERICA:

THE DREAM COMES TRUE

# A

merica was discovered in the name of India. The voyage of Columbus ended in a mistake. The next five hundred years will prove that his error was an accuracy of the gods, says Dhan Gopal Mukerji in Premdatta Varma's book titled *Indian Immigration in USA: Struggle for Equality*.

Indeed, the mistakenly discovered North America became a dreamland for freedom seekers and fortune hunters. Sikh pioneers reached its West Coast towards the end of the nineteenth century. Coming via Hong Kong, they landed at either San Francisco or Vancouver and moved up and down the West Coast of America and Canada.

As they became visible, they became a target during riots and faced discrimination. The legislation in 1917 and 1924 barred them from the mainstream. Both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party called for their exclusion because the outsiders were "dangerous to the well-being of the state."

The Exclusion League called the Indians "an avalanche of death from the Himalayas" and urged the President and Congress to bar their entry into the country.

The steamships bringing Indians were asked to suspend operations. The American Immigration Commission sought an agreement with Britain to stop indentured labour leaving India.

But they kept coming in: retired Sikh soldiers, poor farmers, students and revolutionaries.

'Within a few years of their arrival, Sikh immigrants discovered a Punjab in California with the same sunshine and warmth of the plains and same rich farmlands,' writes Varma.

They moved into the fertile San Joaquin Valley, the Sacramento Valley and the Imperial Valley to work in fields and vineyards and become tenant farmers. They formed the Indian Congress Association of California which lobbied with Congressmen for voting rights.

‘America’s first gurdwara came up at Stockton in 1912. It became the center of Ghadar Party activities. They published *Gunjan* from here,’ says Tejinder Singh Sibia, librarian at the University of California, Davis.

By the 1920s, Sikhs were becoming enterprising. Since laws barred them from buying lands, many married Mexican women and bought lands in their wives’ names.

The Whites were impressed by their success.

As Dady Borjor, an interpreter with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, wrote, ‘Where the White men could not even exist, these so-called Asian hordes are thriving and paying regular incomes to the owners of the lands in the shape of rents or buying them out at prices which ten years ago their owners could not even dream of getting. It is this class of people who want more “Hindus” admitted into the country.’

Then the famous Bhagat Singh Thind case happened. Thind was the first turbaned Sikh to enlist in the US Army. He came to the US in 1913, worked in lumber mills and settled down in Oregon.

When the US entered the First World War, he joined the American Army. After the war, he applied for US citizenship in a district court.

The court said “yes”. But the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) said “no”. It argued that the US law allowed citizenship only to Whites.

Thind went back to the district court. It said “yes” again. But the INS said “no” again.

This time, the INS took the line that Thind was ineligible for citizenship because he supported Indian revolutionaries of the Ghadar Party. (Since the US and Britain were allies, how could the US give citizenship to the latter’s enemy?)

When Thind argued that he had served in the US Army during the War, and that the US too had once fought the British under George Washington, the INS said nothing doing.

The case reached the US Supreme Court in 1921.

The Supreme Court ruled against Thind, saying that the law barred “non-European Whites” from becoming US citizens. Though the people of India were Caucasian by race, the Supreme Court said they were still not “white” enough to become US citizens.

Like so many Asians, Thind lived as a legal resident in the US till 1946 when the Second World War made American exclusionists abandon racist policies.

Finally, President Harry Truman signed the Luce-Celler Bill on 2 July 1946, giving Asians the right to citizenship.

J.J. Singh Wallia, a Washington-based businessman, under his India League, lobbied with the two Congressmen to introduce the Bill.



A SYMBOL OF THE SIKH SUCCESS STORY:

Young Rattan Jorea, who owns the Prime Time Shuttle Service at Los Angeles Airport where he pays more than a million dollars in taxes, is a potent symbol of the Sikh success story in America. Starting with one vehicle in 1984, Jorea now runs more than 200 lorries and flashy cars to ferry passengers to and from one of the busiest airports in the world.

Since then, Sikhs have come in waves to “the land of opportunity”.

In the first wave came professionals, mostly doctors. Not surprisingly, a turbaned Sikh in the '60s used to be addressed as “Dr”. Then came spouses, parents, sisters and brothers and non-professionals, including cabbies in the '80s.

Management and IT professionals formed a major chunk of the third wave in the '90s.

By the end of 2002, there were about 600,000 Sikhs in America.

Though they are spread all over the US, the Sikhs have pockets of concentration in California, New York, Milwaukee and Texas.

The Yuba City area in Northern California is home to more than 20,000 Sikhs. Says Yuba City's most prominent Sikh resident Didar Singh Bains, 'Yuba City *taan Punjab da pind hi lagda hai. Apne lok charpayian daahke baitthde ne utha. Apne bahut bande han. Har saal Guru Gaddi di ik parade hundi hai* (Yuba City resembles a Punjab village. Just like villagers in Punjab, the Sikhs in Yuba City use cots. We have many Sikhs over there. Every year we take out a procession to commemorate the installation of the Granth Sahib).'

All over Yuba City, you hear Punjabi tunes and read Punjabi nameplates. In the three gurdwaras you are greeted with *sat sri akal* by the Punjabi-Mexican hybrid generation of Pedro Singhs and Garcia Kaurs. Apart from Didar Singh Bains, Dr Jasbir Singh Kang and Hardev Singh Shergill stand out for their community service.

Thanks to the efforts of groups like The Sikh Coalition, police forces too have opened their doors to turbaned Sikhs.

When you land at JFK or La Guardia airports in New York, Sikh cabbies welcome you. ‘They became very visible in the late '80s. Today, they are in their thousands,’ says Baldev Grewal, who in 1999 launched New York’s first Punjabi newspaper *Sher-e-Punjab*.

It was these turbaned cabbies who bore the brunt of racial attacks after 9/11.

‘Because of the cabbies and gas jockeys, the profile of the Sikh community has changed dramatically since the '60s. Back then, the Americans used to address a turbaned Sikh as ‘Dr’. Today, they think every turbaned Sikh is either a cabby or a gas jockey,’ laughs Prof Swarnjit Singh Arora of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee.

America has acted like a magnet for Sikh dreamers. And they have made a big mark on its landscape.

Dallas-based IT whizkid Sanjeev Sidhu was rated as the second richest Indian in 2001.

Kanwal Rekhi is called the sage of Silicon Valley.

Dr Narinder Kapany is the father of fiber optics.

Kavelle Bajaj is among the top fifteen women entrepreneurs in the US.

Yogi Harbhajan Singh has spread the Sikh message in the Western Hemisphere through his 3H (Healthy, Happy and Holy) Organization.



Didar Singh Bains is one of the largest peach growers in the world.

Darshan Dhaliwal is one of the biggest gas station owners in the US.

Sant Singh Chatwal and his son, Vikram Singh Chatwal, are among the biggest hoteliers in Manhattan.

Dr Amarjit Singh Marwaha is the granddaddy of Indians in Los Angeles and famed for hosting the Who's Who of India and America on his fourteen-acre ranch in Malibu.

Dr Manjit Singh Bains is a world famous lung expert at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Center in New York.

Dr Harvinder Singh Sahota stands out for his pioneering work in angioplasty.

Washington-based Rajwant Singh runs the Guru Gobind Singh Foundation that interacts with Capitol Hill on inter-faith issues.

Inder Singh is one of the fifteen foremost South Asians in the US.

A one-time pizza delivery boy, techie Jessie Singh is today a Silicon Valley millionaire.

Sonny Chabra, who once sold jeans on a Manhattan pavement, today owns the multi-million AMC Computer Corporation in New York.

Joginder Singh Sidhu is a Guinness Record holder for making the world's smallest camera.

Dr Harbans Lal, who was the first Indian to become chairman of pharmacology in any university in the US, has done more to promote Sikh values than anyone else.

Mrigendra Singh, who taught at the New York State University, is an authority on world religions.

Countless Sikhs work with corporate giants such as General Electric, General Motors, Microsoft, Boeing and Ford.

The 3H Foundation, the Guru Gobind Singh Foundation, the Punjabi Heritage Foundation, the Sikh Foundation, the Hemkunt Foundation, the Academy of Punjab in North America, the Academy of Guru Granth Studies and the Ghura Foundation are the keepers of Sikh traditions.

By 2002, six universities had Chairs of Sikh studies: the Kartar Singh Dhaliwal Professorship of Punjab and Indian Studies at the University of Wisconsin; the Kundan Kaur Kapany Chair of Sikh Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara; the Surjit Singh Patheejja Chair at Valparaiso University, Indiana; the Sardarni Kuljit Kaur Chair in Sikh Studies at Hofstra University; the Michigan University Chair on Sikhism and the Columbia University Program on Sikh Studies.

Few know that the first Asian Congressman in the US was a Sikh named Dalip Singh Saund. The late Saund was elected to the US House of Representatives in 1956. Another Sikh, Neil Dhillon, made a bid for Congress from Maryland in 1994, but failed.



Dr Amarjit Singh Marwaha, who is one of the famous Sikhs in Los Angeles, outside his Malibu mansion.  
Photo courtesy: Zarposh.

Recalls Saund's daughter Ellie Ford, 'My dad came from India to the US as a student in 1920 and did his M.A. and Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1924. Because of discriminatory laws, he could not get a job and moved to the Imperial Valley to earn a living as a farmer.'

A bitter Saund led the Indian Association of America in its fight against discrimination in the 1940s and won them the right to citizenship in 1946. He went on to become a US citizen in 1949.

'Having faced discrimination, dad wanted to be part of decision-making. He joined the Democratic Party unit in the Imperial County and was elected a justice of peace (judge) in the town of Westmoreland in 1950. In 1956, he contested for the House of Representatives from 29th Congressional District and won. I remember how hard my mother and I worked for my father's victory,' says Ellie Ford, attending an Indian gathering in Los Angeles in January 2002 to mark the forty-fifth anniversary of her late father's inauguration as a Congressman.

Saund had met Ellie's mother, Marian Kosa, a first generation Czech American, and married her in 1928. Ellie was one of their three children.

As a Congressman, Saund served on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and visited Asia. He was voted thrice to the House of Representatives. A stroke paralyzed him while he was seeking a fourth term in 1962. He passed away in 1971.

Ellie's voice quivers with emotion when she says, 'He was a great dad. I went with him to India in 1957, and visited his native village near Amritsar. He also met Prime Minister Nehru. We were thrilled.'

Saund's two grandsons — Neil and Eric — are just as thrilled by their grandfather's legacy.

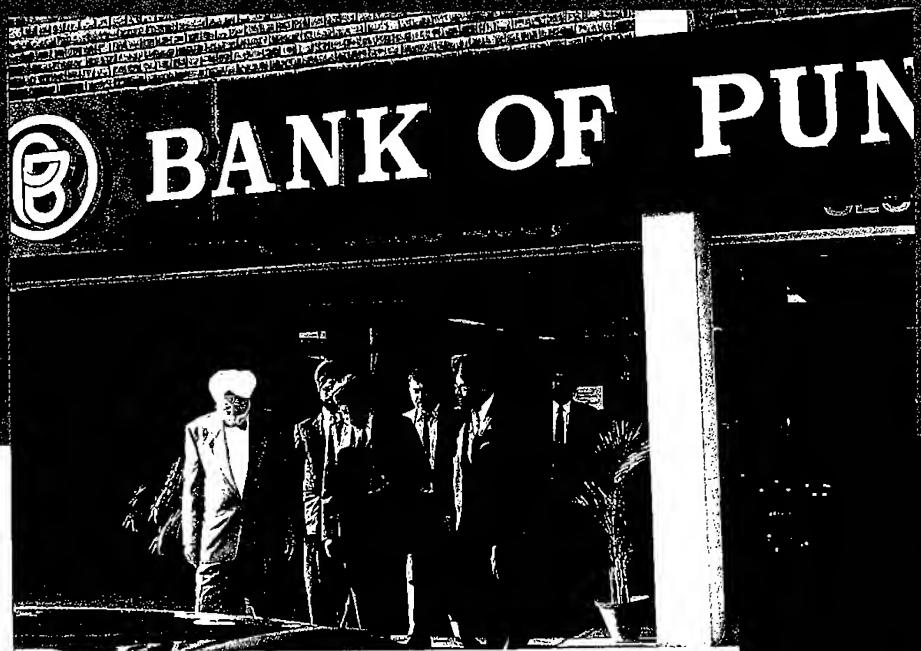
Recalling his association with Saund, Dr Amarjit Singh Marwaha, the grand old man of the Indian community in Los Angeles, says, 'Dalip was a dear friend of mine. I came from Chicago to campaign for him in his election. We raised money for him. People called him Judge Saund. He was the envy of many a White American because of his accomplishments.'

Dr Marwaha, who lives on a fourteen-acre ranch in Malibu, is the envy of many a Hollywood star. Martin Sheen, who acted in the film *Gandhi*, was once his tenant.

Actress and singer Barbara Streisand is his neighbor. 'Barbara's son and my daughter were classmates,' he says.

Overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the ranch has a helipad, a tennis court, a swimming pool, an orchard and a stable.

Dr Marwaha says, 'I have had the privilege of hosting the Kennedys, President Ford, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, President Giani Zail Singh, I.K. Gujral and many Indian bigwigs. Muhammad Ali is a good friend, as are many Hollywood stars.'



Dr Marwaha (left) opening a branch of his Bank of Punjab.



Above: Dr Marwaha with Los Angeles City Mayor Tom Bradley

Centre: Dr Marwaha with his friend and fellow Sikh, Jagtar Singh Atwal

A profusion of pictures on his walls says it all. Here he is with former Vice President Al Gore, and there with Indira Gandhi.

'These pictures represent important moments in my life,' he explains. Upstairs in his house, he points to his various "ethnic" sleeping rooms: Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.

A dentist by profession, Dr Marwaha served as a commissioner of Los Angeles from 1977 to 1993, and chaired the Heritage Commission and the Hollywood Art Commission. The late Tom Bradley, the five-time mayor of Los Angeles, was a close friend of his. Says Dr Marwaha, 'Tom was one of the best mayors in America. When he died, Al Gore and I were among the pall-bearers.'

Born in Shahpura district, now in Pakistan, Marwaha did his dentistry course from King Edward Medical College, Lahore. 'My grandfather was a director of medical services in Faridkot state in the 1880s. My father held the same post in 1914. I worked in Patiala and Nabha before I got a Fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation to study for my Masters and Ph.D. at the University of Illinois. From 1954 to 1962, I taught in Chicago before moving to Los Angeles to teach full-time at the University of Southern California. In 1972, I quit to get full-time into the dentistry profession.'

His was one of the few Indian families in Los Angeles in those days.

'Back then, there were just a handful of Indian students in LA. Since many whites had not seen a turbaned man before, they called me young Santa,' he laughs.

'Sikhs,' he says, 'started coming to Yuba City, El Centro and Fresno in California towards the end of the nineteenth century. The whole area was called grape country. Since the law barred Sikh men from buying land, many married Mexican women (who were US citizens) to buy land in their names. Some Mexican women ran away with the assets. Today's John Singhs and Ted Singhs are the product of those mixed marriages. The community started growing only in the '50s.'

Dr Marwaha was instrumental in setting up the Sikh Temple in Hollywood in 1969 on the 500th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak. Another feather in his turban is the establishment of a sister-city relationship between Bombay and LA in 1968.

Father of three daughters, Dr Marwaha, along with the late Inderjit Singh, founder of Punjab and Sind Bank, launched the Bank of Punjab in the '90s.

His goal, he says, is to make it a world-class bank.

Paying compliments to Dr Marwaha, Mohinder Singh of *India Journal* says, 'Dr Marwaha keeps an open house and an open heart. Time was when everyone coming from India used to carry his address. He is the pride of the Sikh community.'

When the Sikhs faced racist attacks after 9/11 one person who slept very little was Dr Rajwant Singh of Washington.

He took delegations to American leaders, including President George Bush, to seek protection for the Sikh community. 'We reached out to our people in trouble and brought



(Top): Dr Rajwant Singh (second from left), of the Sikh Council on Religion and Education, and Darshan Dhaliwal (right) with President George Bush after 9/11 to seek protection for Sikhs against racial attacks.

(Right): Dr Rajwant Singh with former President Bill Clinton.

(Below): One of the top cancer surgeons in the US, Dr Manjit Singh Bains works at the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York.



their cases to the notice of the authorities. With Gagandeep Kaur of the Sikh Council on Religion and Education, I went on Maureen Field's radio talk show to tell people that the Sikhs had nothing in common with Osama bin Laden.'

When a sniper struck in the Washington area in October 2002, he appeared on CNN with Wolf Blitzer and said, 'It is important that as we face this challenge of violence, the insane shooting, we lift the spirit of peace. This is a very unsettling time for the entire metropolitan area.' A day later, he and his family were also interviewed on ABC's Nightline Show.

A dentistry graduate from Georgetown University, Dr Rajwant Singh is the chairman of the Sikh Council on Religion and Education (SCOPE) based in Washington and the past president of the Interfaith Conference of the Metropolitan Washington, which is an umbrella organization of nine religions and interacts with the government on religious and racial issues.

'American society can learn a lot from the various ethnic groups which are part of its mosaic. We have made suggestions on how we can curb gun violence, racism and AIDS and promote social welfare. The president meets us over breakfast once in a while. I have represented eastern religions in these gatherings. We give our frank views on issues, particular legislation that affect the minorities. To give an example, on our recommendations the Workplace Religious Freedom Act will allow the Sikhs the right to wear kirpan/turban and the Muslims the right to pray at their workplace,' he says.

Dr Rajwant Singh, who came to Washington from Calcutta in 1979, bemoans the lack of a national-level Sikh organization in America. A Sikh think-tank in Washington is a must to highlight our problems, opines Rajwant Singh who heads the Washington-based Guru Gobind Singh Foundation.

The famous Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York has a world famous lung cancer surgeon on its faculty: Dr Manjit Singh Bains.

*The New Yorker Magazine* rates him as one of the best in the country.

But Dr Bains is modest to a fault. 'Well, almost all Sikh doctors have done very well and it is difficult to find one who hasn't: Dr Sarjant Singh Gill of Louisiana and Dr Baljit Singh Sidhu of Virginia are among the best orthopaedic surgeons; Dr Pannu of Florida has developed a new lens technique for cataract surgery; Dr (Mrs) Brar of New Jersey is a famous eye surgeon,' he says.

Dr Bains was the first Sikh to join the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in 1972. 'Because of my turban, I was a sort of novelty at the Center,' he winks.

A graduate from the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, Dr Bains came to New York for an internship in 1964. Later, he moved to Rochester for general surgery training. 'Then I came to the Cornell University Medical Center and the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center where I got a Fellowship in thorax and cardiovascular surgery. But circumstances forced me to limit myself to thorax surgery.'



Dalip Singh Saund was the first Asian to become a Congressman in the '50s.

At Sloan-Kettering, Bains has performed countless lung, food pipe and tumor surgeries. 'I have developed some techniques over the years which help in replacement of the rib cage/breast bone and tumors.'

The American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin felicitated Dr Bains as the Most Distinguished Physician of Indian Origin for the year 2001.

R.S. Uppal, I.J. Singh, Harvinderjit Singh, Ujjagar Singh, Harsimran Singh and Gurpal Singh Bhullar are other Sikh doctors of repute.

Dr Uppal is an ENT specialist as well as a realtor.

Dr I.J. Singh is a well-known dentist in New York and author of two books on Sikhism. Dr Harvinderjit Singh is supporting the Eye Hospital at Sohana near Chandigarh.

The Patiala Medical College has hundreds of alumni working in the US.

One such alumnus is Dr Harvinder Singh Sahota who has done pioneering work in angioplasty. A practicing cardiologist in Southern California since 1978, Sahota has been credited with inventing the perfusion balloon which is today used in angioplasty all over the world.

'In 1979 when angioplasty started, I was one of the first ten cardiologists in the world to be involved in it. During operations, I found that you needed to ensure blood flow to heart muscles during balloon inflation. This led me to invent the perfusion balloon that was okayed by the FDA in 1989. I have its patent rights,' he says.

Called the *Sahota Balloon*, this technique increases the success rate of angioplasty significantly. 'It eliminates the blockage of blood flow during the actual procedure and allows the balloon to be continuously inflated for several hours as against previous angioplasty procedures,' Sahota explains.

He performed North India's first coronary angioplasty at PGI, Chandigarh, in January 1990. 'I performed ten to twelve operations through the perfusion balloon and taught doctors how to use the technique,' he says.

Sahota also performed the first angioplasty operation in Moscow.

Decorated with the Distinguished Physician Award for the year 2000 by the Indian Medical Association, Sahota serves on the boards of various heart institutes, including the Institute of Therapy at Tbilisi in Georgia.

As head of the Sahota Cardiological Group based at Bellflower in California, Sahota serves on the staff of various Los Angeles hospitals as well.

Born in 1941 near Hoshiarpur, Sahota was almost declared dead on birth. 'Within two weeks of my birth, I was stricken by what later came to be known as Cheyne-Stokes Respiration. As they were preparing for my funeral, a neighbor forced the doctor to re-examine me. Luckily, the doctor noticed my pulse. He found I was still breathing.'



(Top): Saund's daughter Ellie Ford and her husband (extreme right) at a function held in Los Angeles in Jan 2002 to mark the 45th anniversary of his congressional inauguration.

(Above): Saund's grandson (right).

'I was put on an oxygen cylinder brought from Lahore. I was alive again. My father said he will make his son a doctor,' he says. Sahota did his MBBS from Patiala in 1964 and left for England to specialize in cardiology. He moved to the US in 1974. His wife, Asha, is a gynaecologist by training.

Two other Patiala alumni, Dr Amrik Singh Chattha and his wife, Dr Jaswinder Kaur Chattha, have made their mark not only in their chosen profession but also in community service.

The Chatthas are the founding-members of the Sikh Council of North America, the Patiala Medical College Alumni Association and the Sikh Heritage Foundation.

The Foundation collaborated with the National Museum of Natural History in Washington in August 2001 to organize a gala fundraiser for setting up a permanent exhibition of Sikh heritage at the world famous Smithsonian Institute, Washington.

Dr Amrik Singh Chattha moved to the US in 1967 to specialize in adult/child neurology and epilepsy from Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. Jaswinder Kaur Chattha, who specialized in psychology, was the first South Asian doctor to practice in West Virginia in 1974.

Dallas-based Dr Harbans Lal's name may not sound Sikh, but he is a Sikh to the core.

Known as Bhai Harbans Lal, he has made unmatched contribution to promoting an understanding of Sikhism in North America. His writings regularly appear in the *Sikh Review*, *Sikh Sansar*, the *Sikh Courier*, the *Spokesman*, *Journal of Sikhism and Comparative Religions*, *Understanding Sikhism*, the *Research Journal*, *Sach Khand Patrika*, *From Both Sides of the Ocean*, *Miri Piri*, and *Gurbani Is Jag Meh Chanan* and others.

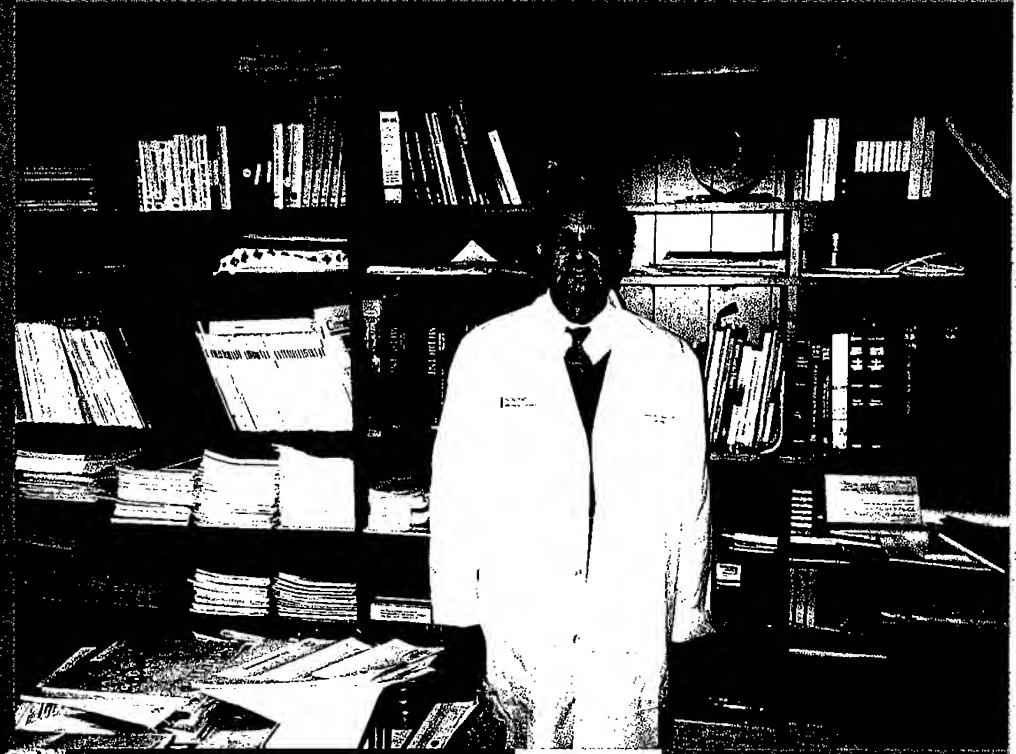
Dr Lal is a member of the Interfaith Council, and an advisor to the American Project on Religion and the News Media, and the Sikh Foundation.

'The Guru Nanak Dev University (Amritsar) conferred a doctorate on him in 1995. The Anandpur Sahib Foundation bestowed the highest Order of the Khalsa award on him in 1999 on the occasion of the tercentenary of the Khalsa,' he says, walking up the steps of the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

The SGPC and the Chief Khalsa Diwan have also felicitated him for his contribution to Sikhism.

Born at Hazara in Pakistan in 1931 'in answer to my family's prayers at Panja Sahib gurdwara,' Harbans Lal left for the US in 1956 to do his graduation in pharmacy. He went on to do his Masters in pharmacology and toxicology from the University of Kansas and a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. He retired from the Chair of Pharmacology from the University of North Texas in 2000. In the process, he became the first Indian to hold a Chair of Pharmacology at any medical school in the US.

Married to Amrit Kaur (a German) since 1964, Harbans Lal has published more than four hundred research papers, twenty books, several research reviews and fifty-six chapters



(Top): Los Angeles-based Dr Harvinder Singh Sahota has pioneered the Sahota Balloon in angioplasty.

(Above): Dr Amrik Chattha and Mrs Jaswinder Chattha are the brain behind the Sikh Heritage Foundation at the world famous Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

in technical books. The University of North Texas Health Science Center has established a post-doctoral Fellowship in his name.

A former president of the Association of Scientists of Indian Origin in America, Harbans Lal says proudly, 'You know, I created history in 1954 by becoming the first non-turbaned president of the All-India Sikh Students' Federation (AISSF).'

Dr Mrigendra Singh is an expert on world religions and comparative philosophy. He taught at New York State University and authored *Classical Foundations of Sikh Theological Philosophy and Mysticism* and the two-volume *Vadan Sagar*.

One of the first Sikhs to come to New York in the early '70s, he has closely watched the evolution of the Sikh community in New York. 'When I came to the city in 1972, there were just five hundred Sikhs and one gurdwara at Richmond Hill,' he says.

The community has been incredibly successful, but there remains a problem: lack of unity. 'We have brought our gurdwara squabbles to the US. Gurdwara elections were introduced as part of the British policy of divide and rule. The colonial rulers promoted parallel sects to create divisions among us. They created the Singh Sabha. Where was the need for it when there already was a Sikh Sabha? Again, Sikhism is being preached wrongly. The Sikh doctrine is monoism, not monotheism. It does not pit its own god against someone else's god,' he says.

America's first Punjabi studies program was started in 1984 at Michigan University. And it was the brainchild of Satnam Singh Bhugra.

He came to the US at the age of thirty-three in 1966 to do a Ph.D. in education from Utah State University. He stayed back and taught at that university and the Valley City State University, North Dakota. 'In 1975, I moved to Michigan University to take charge of teachers' education program. On my recommendation, the University started the first Punjabi Studies Program in 1984. Later, the Sikh community collected 1.2 million dollars to start the first full-fledged Chair of Punjabi Studies at Michigan in 1992-93,' Bhugra says.

Gurinder Singh Mann is another Sikh scholar who has worked tirelessly to promote Punjabi overseas.

Mann holds a doctorate in religion from Columbia University, New York, where he also taught Sikh studies from 1988 to 1999.

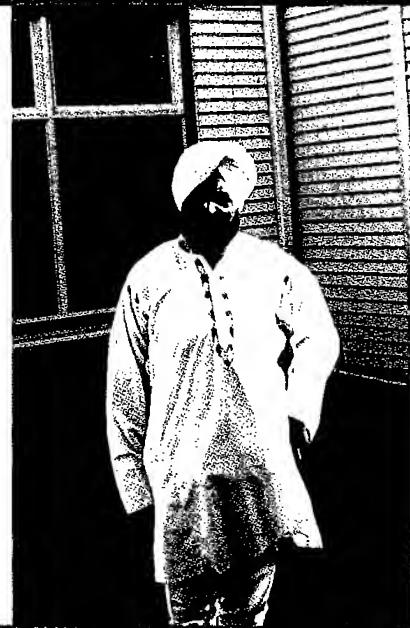
Currently, Professor of Sikh Studies at the Kundan Kaur Kapany Chair at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Mann's research and teaching interests range from the formation of the Sikh canon, religion and society in Punjab to the Sikh community in the US.

His publications include *Sikhism*, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, and *The Goindval Pothis*.

Mann has also collaborated in publishing *Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs of America* and *Studying the Sikhs: Issues for North America*.

In addition, he has contributed all entries on Sikhism in *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* one-volume *Encyclopaedia of Religions* (1999).

## THINK TANK



(Clockwise from top left):

Dallas-based Sikh scholar Harbans Lal was the first non-turbaned president of the All-India Sikh Student Federation in 1954.

Gurinder Mann of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Dr Jasbir Mann has brought together Sikh scholars to debate issues facing Sikhism .

Dr Mrigendra Singh of New York blames the British for dividing the Sikhs.

Dr Pashaura Singh of Michigan University.

Over the years, Mann has worked towards promoting Sikh and Punjab studies in North America. He has lectured at many universities and public forums, organized eleven conferences at Columbia and UC Santa Barbara, and represented the Sikh religion in projects such as 'Religious Landscape of America' directed by Diana Eck at Harvard University, and 'A Nation of Religions', directed by Peter Berger at Boston University.

'I have also held workshops on the teaching of Punjabi in Singapore and am associated with the development of Punjabi language program at Simon Fraser University, Canada. I am also in the process of creating material for teaching Punjabi as a foreign language,' he says.

As founding director of the Summer Program in Punjab Studies in Chandigarh, Mann brought together eighty scholars from thirty-nine universities in seven countries (Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, Sweden and the US) to participate in a six-week intensive program of study and travel in Punjab.

Currently, he is busy setting up a Center for Sikh and Punjabi Studies at UC, Santa Barbara.

Another Sikh scholar of repute in America is Pashaura Singh.

An Assistant Professor of Sikh Studies and Punjabi Language at the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, since 1992, Pashaura Singh has promoted understanding of the Sikh religion through seminars, debates, and chats.

His research and specialization include religion, history and society in Sikh studies, and modern and classical Punjabi. His publications include the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the *Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib* and *Sikh Identity*.

In the world of finance, the name of Dr Shamsher Singh Babra stands out. He was the first Sikh to join the World Bank in Washington. 'I was also the first Indian to become a division chief in the bank,' says Dr Babra who retired as a policy advisor to the bank.

Born at Guru Ki Glotian in Sialkot district of Pakistan and educated at the Sikh National College, Lahore, young Babra was jailed and tortured during the Partition.

He studied in Delhi after the Partition and went to London in 1953 for higher studies. In 1955, he came to the American University (in Washington D.C.) where he received his Ph.D. in economics. 'After that I joined the World Bank in 1962. While at the bank, I lectured at several universities around the globe and was a Visiting Fellow at Oxford,' says Dr Babra.

Dr Babra has the distinction of participating in UN negotiations on the New International Economic Order and International Commodity Agreements. He also testified before the Select Committees of the British House of Lords and the German Bundestag concerning Third World problems.

Known throughout the world as Dr Shamsher Singh of World Bank, he is also a reputed poet and scholar.



Multi-millionaire Dr Narinder Kapany (left) is known as the czar of fiber optics in Silicon Valley.

His latest book titled *Unblossomed Bud: A Saga of Intellectual Rebels* dwells on India's freedom struggle and the pre-Partition chaos. These days, Dr Babra lives in Washington D.C. and is busy with the construction of a gurdwara cum cultural center.

In information technology, Sikhs were first off the block. In fact, they were in Silicon Valley even before the name was coined. Dr Narinder Singh Kapany is one such long-term resident of Silicon Valley.

Called the father of fiber optics, he was one of the earliest Indians to come to Silicon Valley. 'I was here in 1960 well before the name Silicon Valley was coined,' laughs Dr Kapany, who lives in the Bay Area of San Francisco with his wife, Satinder.

Fiber optics and lasers are his forte. He holds more than a hundred patents in fiber optics, laser technology, biomedical instrumentation, and solar energy.

Born in Moga and raised in Dehradun, Kapany began his affair with light while still at school. As he recalls, 'A teacher once said that light travels in a straight line. I had my doubts.'

The study of light became his passion. After his graduation from Agra University, he went to the Imperial College of Science and Technology, London, to study optics. 'Then I enrolled for my Ph.D. in fiber optics. In 1954, I wrote in the British journal *Nature* about the successful transmission of images through fiber optical bundles of glass or plastic. In 1955, I moved to the US. My original idea was to be in the US for a year and then go back to India and start an optics business. But once you come to the US, it is difficult to get out,' he says.

For two years, he taught at the University of Rochester in New York. Then he went to Chicago to head the optics department at the Illinois Institute of Technology. 'In 1960, I moved to California to start Optics Technology to make fiber optics. It went public in 1967. I started Kaptron which I sold in 1990 and started K2 Optronics in 1999. It has been an exhilarating journey. And very rewarding,' says the genial Kapany.

He has four books on opto-electronics and more than one hundred citation papers to his credit.

Honored with 'The Excellence 2000 Award' by the USA Pan-Asian American Chamber of Commerce, Dr Kapany has supervised post-graduate research at many US universities.

His accomplishments were noticed in his native India as early as 1967 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi honored him for his research.

A philanthropist and art collector, Dr Kapany brought the *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms Exhibition* from London's Victoria & Albert Museum to San Francisco in May 2000, and loaned his own collection of paintings to it. He also gifted his own collection of Sikh art to the Asian Art Museum, and donated \$500,000 to establish a sub-gallery in the Satinder Kaur Kapany Gallery to display them. In 1998, he endowed the Kundan Kaur Chair of Sikh Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Way back in 1967, Dr Kapany set up the Sikh Foundation to promote an understanding of the Sikh religion. 'We have such a lovely religion. The Sikhs should understand it first —



John H. Johnson, founder of Ebony magazine

Photo by Jim Lippard

sadly most Sikhs don't understand who they are. Second, we need to make the Americans aware about our glorious history and past. It will make life easier for our children. Through its program and publications, the Sikh Foundation is communicating to the Americans the richness of our heritage.'

According to Dr Kapany, the Sikh scriptures must be translated into English or else we will lose our heritage with the passage of time.

Kanwal Rekhi is the guru of Indian IT gurus in Silicon Valley.

Having made name and *nama* (money), Rekhi is sage, mentor and venture capitalist to young Indian aspirants today.

An electrical engineering graduate from IIT, Bombay, and a M.Tech from Michigan Technology University, Rekhi was one of the first Indians to see the potential of Silicon Valley in the '70s and make it big.

One of eight children of an army man, Rekhi was born in Rawalpindi in 1945. Crossing into India as a two-year-old refugee, Rekhi grew up in Kanpur and graduated in electrical engineering from IIT, Bombay, where he set up the Kanwal Rekhi School of Technology in 1999 by donating \$3.31 million to produce 'future leaders' of the IT industry. Rekhi came to Michigan Technology University in 1967 and finished his Masters in 1969.

Losing three jobs in quick succession because of the recession, young Rekhi saw his future in Silicon Valley and landed in San Jose with his wife, Ann Holt, in 1971. A couple of jobs later, he was bitten by the entrepreneurial bug and joined hands with two other Indians to launch Excelan in 1982.

Excelan manufactured add-in boards to connect desktop computers in a local area. But its birth was not without pangs. More than a hundred venture capitalists said 'no' to it because the company didn't have the right manager.

Rekhi pressed ahead. 'Because I had a point to prove: that Indians are not only great techies but also great entrepreneurs and managers.'

He had the last laugh.

Excelan went public in 1987. And *Arthur Young/Venture Magazine* named Rekhi Entrepreneur of the Year.

When he sold the company to Novell in 1989 for \$250 million, he was among the first Indian millionaires in Silicon Valley. Rekhi stayed on the Board of Directors of Novell — the first Indian to hold that position on the board of the multi-billion company.

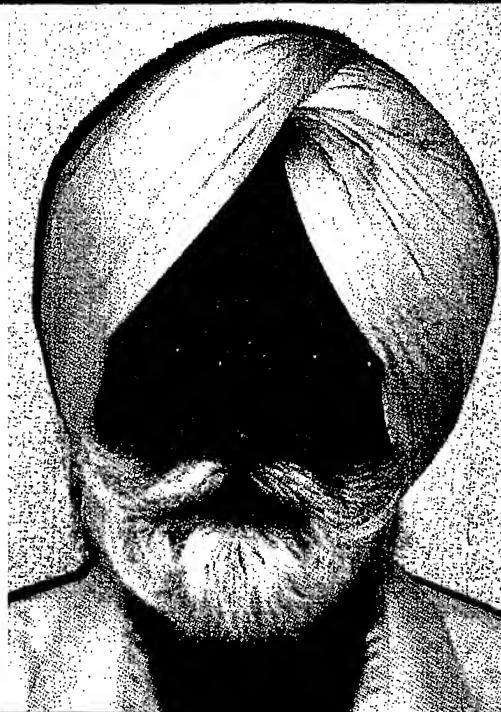
Later, he quit and decided to help Indian start-ups with capital and skills. The result: The Indus Entrepreneur (TiE) — a global network of entrepreneurs and professionals.

One of the best-known beneficiaries of TiE was Sabeer Bhatia, who started Hotmail and later sold it to Microsoft for \$400 million.



(Above): Dallas-based IT whizkid Sanjeev Sidhu has made more money than any other Sikh in America.

(Right): A US resident since 1965, San Francisco-based Dr Jogeshwar Preet Singh, who belongs to the family of former Patiala PM Raja Gurdit Singh of Rajgarh, is an internationally known expert on earthquakes.



*Forbes* magazine calls Rekhi the “dominant investor and sage to Silicon Valley’s affluent Indian community.” India’s poverty galls him. And his life-long goal, he says, is to transform his motherland. India, he says, has what it takes to become a superpower, but there is no political will and leadership to push things forward. ‘India is poor by choice. It has stifled free enterprise. Empower people and the entrepreneur, not the bureaucrat. Follow the politics of wealth creation, not the politics of poverty perpetuation. Primary education is the first step in this direction,’ he says.

Towards this end, Rekhi has contributed one million dollars to the Foundation for Excellence to help poor students in India.

Reflecting on his success, he says, ‘When first-rate people get first-class atmosphere, they thrive. I have always felt that a sure way to win in business or anything else in life is to ensure that everybody who is associated with your endeavor is also a winner. This assumes that you do not tolerate incompetence or the lack of effort on anybody’s part. Give it your best and make everybody around you give it their best. Results will follow.’

What does his Sikh background mean to him?

‘I have always tried to live by the Sikh creed. *Naam Japo, Kirit Karo, Wund Chhako* (remember God, make an honest living and share your good fortune with others). I place a great emphasis on intellectual honesty, high mindedness and fair play. I also put a great value on modern scientific thinking and making my own value/morality decisions about things and traditions. Obviously, my background prepared me well for life. I grew up in the idealistic ’50s, in the after-glow of the Independence, and ended up in a very competitive environment at IIT, Bombay. I have always considered Mahatma Gandhi and Guru Gobind Singh my role models,’ says the Silicon legend.

The Sikh who captured the imagination of America is IT whizkid Sanjeev Sidhu. Chairman and CEO of i2 Technology, which in 2000 raked in more than \$570 million in e-commerce business, Sidhu is considered to be one of the richest — if not *the* richest — Indians in the US.

i2 Technology, which was set up in 1988 in Dallas, is the world’s top purveyor of supply-chain software to help make sound business decisions.

‘We want to be known as the provider of intelligent e-business solutions,’ he says.

More than six hundred companies around the world, including Texas Instruments, 3M, Frito-Lay, IBM, Johnson and Johnson, Lipton, Dell, Ford, Toshiba and Coke are his customers.

Sidhu, who in 2000 led the biggest IT merger by merging i2 with Aspect Development, outlines his business philosophy as: optimum value for customers.

In 2000, Hyderabad-born Sidhu had a personal worth of more than \$700 million.

*Upside* magazine describes him as “stunningly” brilliant.



From left: John, his wife, and their son, John Jr., in front of their home in New York. John's father has been dead

'He can be as ruthless as Bill Gates, as paranoid as Andy Grove and as electrifying as a Baptist preacher. He is soft-spoken yet adept at whipping a roomful of employees and customers into a frenzy. An accomplished storyteller, he is uncomfortable with small talk. He keeps himself motivated by the belief that the elements out there are trying to get him. He can be downright cut-throat in his business dealings. Sanjeev wants to win at any cost. He is very much driven to dominate,' says the magazine.

What about his own self-assessment?

Born to an illustrious father who supervised India's chemical labs, Sidhu did his degree in chemical engineering from Osmania University. Then he moved to the US where he got his Masters in 1980 from Oklahoma University. While pursuing a doctorate in systems engineering, Sanjeev took up a job at Texas Instruments' Tennessee facility. In 1985, he moved to Dallas to work in its artificial intelligence laboratory.

And then his real intelligence took over!

Based on his observation that even the smartest of people can juggle no more than nine variables when making decisions, he proposed a design for computer software based on artificial intelligence and advanced simulation techniques.

'His work at the lab gave him exposure to the mathematics and precepts that enable a computer to model various constraints in a system (such as a factory's manufacturing capacity), and hypothesize solutions. Sidhu was convinced he was on to something with immense commercial applications. In 1988, despite his wife's pregnancy, Sidhu quit his job at Texas Instruments and began the heads-down programming that would lead to the founding of i2. For two years, he worked alone in his apartment to develop, refine and eventually patent the artificial intelligence-based technology that is the basis of i2's pioneering supply-chain products,' says *Upside* magazine.

Sidhu is the undisputed world leader in his field, employing thousands of people worldwide.

Kavelle Bajaj stands tall among women entrepreneurs in the US.

By far the most successful Sikh woman in the US, she has received numerous awards, including Entrepreneur of the Year Award, Hi-Tech Entrepreneur of the Year and the Glory of India Award.

Liane Enkiels and Karen Olsen in their book *Portrait of Women Business Leaders* put her among the top fifteen women entrepreneurs in America.

The authors say, 'Her journey is the stuff legends are made of.'

A multi-millionaire today, Kavelle says, 'When I landed in America as a demure twenty-three-year-old housewife in 1974, from Delhi to join my computer scientist husband, Ken, I knew little about America or computers. My family and degree in Home Economics had prepared me to be the perfect housewife.'



(Above): Once a pizza delivery boy and now an IT multi-millionaire in Silicon Valley, Jessie Singh (left) is seen with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

(Right): Jessie with former Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal.



Over the next few years, she was to keep the house and raise two sons — Sunny and Rueben.

But being a housewife and mother was tough. ‘It was a thankless job and my self-esteem was wilting,’ she says in a serious tone.

Kavelle joined a computer class.

‘You see computer was the buzzword in the late 1970s and 1980s. This opened a whole new world of possibilities for me,’ she says.

Armed with a single personal computer, she set out to change her world. At the time, systems integration was in its infancy. Corporations and governments were desperate to get independent help to manage their information systems and networks.

Kavelle came up with the concept of a “Total Systems Solution”. And I-NET was born.

It soon turned into a multi-million dollar enterprise. I-NET had a long list of clients, including the US Department of Defense and other well-known corporations in oil and gas, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, telecom, and other industries.

She convinced her husband Ken to leave his fast-track career with EDS, where he was a vice president in 1989.

In 1996, Kavelle sold I-NET to WANG Labs for millions of dollars.

In 1998, along with her husband Ken, she started AppNet Systems, a company specializing in electronic commerce. This company went public and was later sold in 2000 to Commerce One Inc.

Kavelle, who has just turned fifty, has already put away her cursor and mouse to pursue her passion for music. ‘I have already released two CDs. The first one, *Sant Sipahi* is a tribute to the Khalsa. The second one titled *Immortal Punjabi Folk Songs* is a contemporary twist to popular folk songs.’

What is the secret of her success?

‘My faith in *Wahe Guru* has brought me where I am today,’ says Kavelle.

She believes in hard work, honesty, integrity and fair dealings with people. She is involved in several organizations in the United States, such as the Smithsonian Institute to promote Indian and Sikh art, history and culture. She also participates as a motivational speaker at conferences, and acts as a mentor to other entrepreneurs.

Another Sikh IT whizkid who has soared high is Jagdeep Singh, who created history in 1999 when he sold his newly created Lightera Network for \$552 million to optical networking equipment maker Ciena. It was the highest-valued sale of a pre-product, pre-revenue private company! Lightera Network was created to facilitate the transfer of data in thin fiber optic cables across long distances.

From a pizza delivery boy to an IT wizard! That’s the story of Jessie Singh of Silicon Valley.



Jessie Singh and his family with former President Bill Clinton.

Born at Majra village in Gurdaspur district and a B.Tech from Punjab Agriculture University, Ludhiana, Jessie Singh came to the US in 1986 to join his wife.

'I started my life in the US as a pizza delivery boy. Then I worked as a gas jockey. Then followed a two-year stint as a patient representative for a hospital,' says the ever-smiling Jessie Singh.

He then struck out on his own.

'In 1986, a day after Christmas, I floated BJS Electronics Inc. and kicked off my business with a ninety-dollar order,' he gushes. Jessie Singh's fortunes have been on the rise ever since.

Today, he is worth millions and lives in the posh Almaden Valley in San Jose with his wife Surinder and three children: Sunny, Gary and Shelly.

Jessie was the first entrepreneur to hire people above sixty-five to work for his BJS Electronics. For this, the Santa Clara County bestowed "the Edna McGhee Community Award" on him.

The US Congress lauded his work and *Good Morning America* interviewed him.

He was voted Entrepreneur of the Year in 1999 by the *San Jose Business Journal* and inducted in the Hall of Success Museum in San Jose.

Jessie Singh has hosted many top political leaders, including former Vice-President Al Gore, who once said, 'Jessie Singh is a prime example of what we can do if we work hard.'

According to Jessie, the American Sikhs have arrived. 'They are right there in the top bracket.'

But they have to safeguard their interests by becoming part of the decision-making process. 'If you work with politicians, you get things done for your community.' Jessie was part of a sixteen-member Sikh delegation that met President George Bush after the September 11 attacks on the US and the subsequent violence against Sikhs.

'The US Congress has already passed a Bill recognizing the Sikhs as a separate community, and now we are lobbying the President and Congress to allow Sikhs to wear their symbols in the US forces,' he informs.

For his role in achieving a sister-state relationship between Punjab and California, the Punjab government has given him the Punjab Rattan Award. 'I am the first NRI to get this award,' Jessie beams.

Jessie Singh's philosophy: As you sow, so shall you reap. Work hard. Be fair.

From selling jeans on a New York pavement to owning a multi-million IT company in Manhattan! Well, that's the story of Sonny (Surinder) Chabra. He is the man with the Midas touch.



New York-based multi-millionaire computer buff Surinder Chabra, who once sold jeans on a pavement in Manhattan, poses after winning the Ellis Island Medal in May 2001.

He bought a bankrupt company in 1992 and turned it into a hundred-million dollar venture in seven years. Today, his AMC Corporation designs advanced technology solutions for corporate giants.

For realizing his American dream, Surinder (Sonny) Chabra was given the prestigious Ellis Island Medal by the US Congress in May 2001. The award named after Ellis Island, which used to be the first port of call for immigrants to New York, honors those who distinguish themselves with their work among various ethnic groups and for their contribution to the US economy and culture.

Leaning over his desk in his eleventh floor office at the AMC headquarters on 27th Street in Manhattan, Chabra says proudly, 'Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who played a heroic role after the September 11 attacks, was also honored with this award at that gala function. The very fact that former Presidents George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton, Secretary of State Colin Powell, General Norman Schwarzkopf, and Donald Trump were among the Ellis Island Medal winners gives you a special feeling. You have entered the Congressional records. Only six Indians — Dr Jagdish Bhagwati, Bharat Bhatt, Rajat Gupta, Brij Lal, Monte Ahuja and myself — have so far received this award. This time, over 38,000 names were nominated, 10,000 shortlisted and 140 selected.'

Chabra is also the winner of the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 1998. He was the Blue Chip Entrepreneur of the Year in 1999.

An engineering graduate from Panjab University, Chabra first worked with Escorts at Faridabad and later moved to Iraq to work with a Swedish truck company. From Iraq, he moved to Kuwait to work with a US company. In 1985, he landed in New York.

'Once in New York, I realized that engineers didn't make much money. Doctors, lawyers and accountants did. I thought why invest in a career which has a ceiling, so to speak,' he says.

What was his first job?

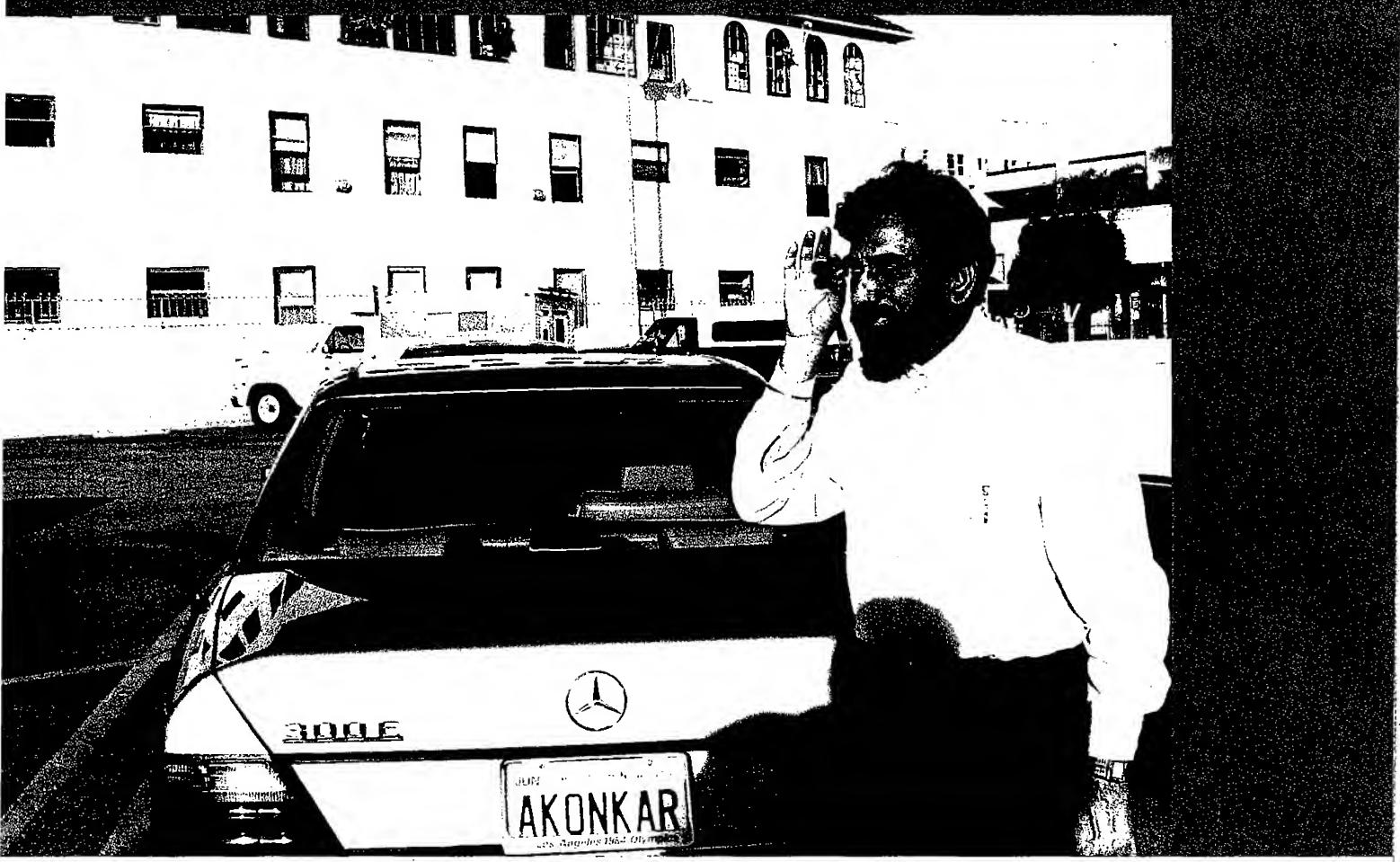
'I started off as a car salesman with a Chrysler dealer. As luck would have it, in 1988 I moved to computer sales. Within four months, I was the best salesman of the company.'

Over the next four years, Chabra was the owner of the company! And it was a twenty-five million dollar bankrupt company known as American Mini Computers. He renamed it AMC Corporation.

Why did he buy a bankrupt company?

Chabra leans back and says, 'In 1992, the company was not making money. So the three partners decided to sell it. The president told me that they were closing within four weeks and I must look for a job. I thought I should buy the company and give it a try. Next day, I went to the president and offered to buy it. He had a quizzical expression on his face which said: If financial experts can fail, how can you succeed?'

But Chabra did succeed. 'I pruned the staff, called my brother Narinder from Canada and worked seventeen hours a day, seven days a week.'



(Top) Los Angeles-based legend Ali, who was the world's liveliest boxer in 1982, poses through his legend in his home town. (Bottom) Muhammad Ali's son, Muhammad Jr., became the first black child to get the honor of ringing a bell at the opening ceremony of the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

(Bottom) Muhammad Ali's son, Muhammad Jr., became the first black child to get the honor of ringing a bell at the opening ceremony of the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.



Within six months, AMC sales rose by hundred per cent.

Within a year, it repaid its loans.

And within seven years, AMC crossed the hundred-million dollar mark!

Forbes listed it as one of the "Technology Fast 50." *Inc500* magazine put it among the top five hundred growing companies.

In 1999, Chabra set up a web-enabling e-commerce consulting firm with his friend and tech wizard Arvind Walia. 'It is doing great as an enterprise portal developer.'

Next on his agenda is to set up a model healthcare facility in America. 'The facility will have hundreds of beds, modern suites for a hostel, a nursing home and state-of-the-art labs,' he says.

Born in 1953, Chabra is a man of many parts. He hosted the International Punjabi Society gathering in New York in 2000 and paid \$60,000 for a cruise safari for the participants.

When Sikhs faced racial attacks after 9/11, Chabra was in the forefront of a campaign to make people aware about Sikhs and Sikhism.

For his community work, Chabra was given the Jewel of India Award by I.K. Gujral, the Pride of India Award by H.D. Deve Gowda and the Punjabi Rattan Award by Senator Hillary Clinton in 2000.

He puts his success down to three reasons. 'Having a goal and constantly reviewing and upping the ante, the desire to give everything to achieve a goal. Finally, my mother's blessings and the grace of God.'

Chabra's success formula: 3Ds. Dream. Discipline. Dedication.

Innovation has been the success formula of Los Angeles-based Joginder Sidhu, who was once the Guinness record holder for making the world's smallest camera.

Made in 1982, the camera was half the size of the human eye. And one-tenth the size of the smallest Japanese camera!

Driving down Hollywood Boulevard, Sidhu says, 'When I was an engineering student in Chandigarh, my fiancée bought me a copy of the *Guinness Book of Records*. I found no Indian entry in technology. As we were fond of photography, both of us decided to design the smallest possible camera.'

But it turned out to be the smallest in the world. And Sidhu was in the Guinness Book in 1982!

An innovative student, Sidhu had already invented two gadgets by 1982: A helmet lock and a speaking postcard. 'You put the card on the machine and record the message.'

Sidhu was in the news when US Solar Energy chief C.J. Sweat visited India in 1982. Sweat met the young engineer with a job offer in Houston. 'For five years, I worked on a research project with that company and developed twenty-nine products,' says Sidhu.



(top) Sonbhadra Patel and Gary Singh Chauhan and his wife Damani with former President Bill Clinton.

(above) Gary Chauhan and his son (left) of the International Punjabi Society with Hillary Clinton at a dinner gathering in New York in July 2000.

By 1989, he was on his own. Sidhu started Super Tex to make high-end accessories. Next, he floated Powerplus. Yet another company of his designed consumer products for Kenwood and AT&T. And his Gycon Systems company did e-business.

Sidhu sold his inventions through his own Innovative Sun Limited. Without specifying, he says, 'One of my inventions has fetched me seven million dollars.'

By 2002, 14 of his inventions were on sale, earning him huge royalties. 'Radio Shack, which has the largest network in the US, is selling four of my products,' Sidhu says.

A member of the American Advancement of Science Committee, Sidhu serves as a director of many companies.

His wife, Charanjiv Kaur, is working with Jacoby and Meyers — one of the largest law firms in the US.

Their son Manavjeet became the first Sikh child to get the rare honor of placing a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington in May 1999. He earned this honor after his article titled "Why I would like to place a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier" was adjudged as one of the four best essays in the US.

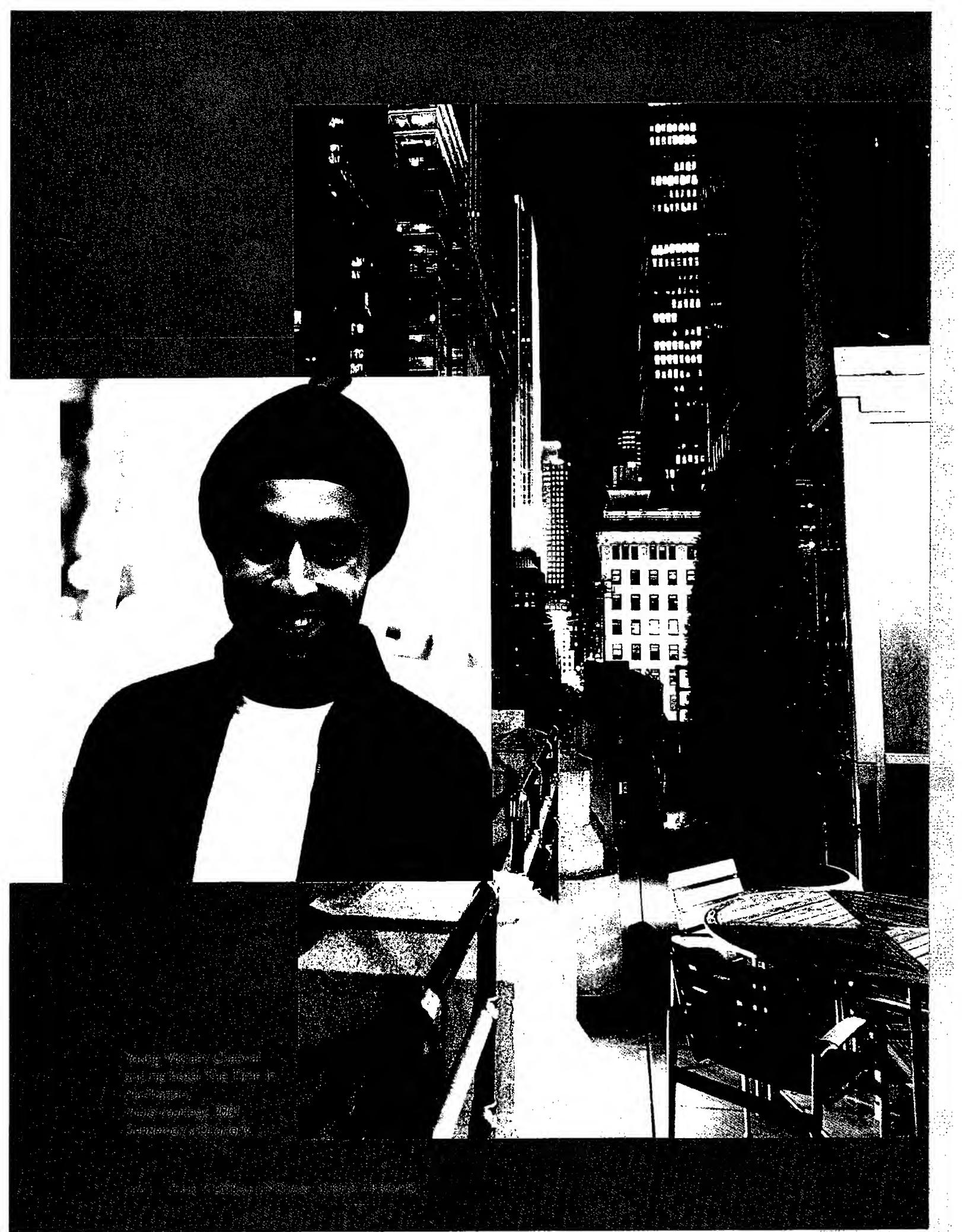
From techies to businessmen and Sant Singh Chatwal leads the pack. He is probably the most well-known turbanned face in America today. A close friend of the Clintons and one of the richest American Sikhs, Chatwal owns Hampshire Hotels and Resorts. 'I have Bombay Palace restaurants all over the West: One in London, two in Montreal, four in Toronto, two in New York, one in Houston, one in Los Angeles, one in Washington, one in Budapest and one in Kuala Lumpur,' says Chatwal, sitting in the top-floor penthouse of his forty-five-storey high-rise in Manhattan.

Surveying the Manhattan skyline sans the Twin Towers, Chatwal says, 'I own a French restaurant in Manhattan run by the world famous chef Palladin and an Italian restaurant. As part of our Hampshire Hotels and Resorts chain, we have fifteen hotels with three thousand rooms. And we are the single largest group in New York, with nine hotels and two thousand rooms in Manhattan alone.'

Chatwal's son, Vikram, who is a former Vogue model, runs The Time which is one of the best hotels in the US. 'It was part of my deal with my parents — that I will run a hotel only if they didn't insist on my marriage,' says young Vikram, who became the first turbanned Sikh to be featured by the *New York Times* in its society columns in September 1999.

In his second-floor office at The Time, Vikram slowly rises from his seat. Jamming his hands into his trouser pockets, he asks, 'Do you know I have worked in Ben Stiller's movie *Zoolander*? I am featuring in a new French movie as well.'

The *New York Times* magazine too featured him in February 2000. And so has *Asia-21*. 'New Yorkers love millionaires. But they seem to like billionaires even better. Ever since Vikram Chatwal, a Wharton graduate, declared that his ambition was to become the first Sikh billionaire, he has been the toast of the richest city in the world,' wrote the magazine.



Warming to his pet theme — The Time — he says, ‘It is for the hip crowd (below thirty). It has two hundred rooms and we spent forty-two million dollars on it.’

Indeed, The Time is the Manhattan address of Hollywood stars.

Inspired by Theroux’s book titled *The Primary Colors*, Vikram and designer guru Adam Tihany joined hands to sire this concept in the hotel business. The rooms at The Time, which sits next to the MTV headquarters in Times Square, are a riot of colors: blue, red and yellow.

‘The philosophy is to allow the guests to choose rooms according to their mood — where a color can be experienced through sight, sense, taste and smell. So, the red room has strawberries strewn around ... blue berries decorate the blue rooms and pineapple, bananas and lemons are enjoyed in the yellow room. A vial of scent named after the color enhances the mood. The use of primary colors creates a very private experience that is unique to each guest,’ wrote *Asia-21* magazine.

A self-described “model-hotelier-actor-screenwriter-romantic,” Vikram rubs shoulders with the rich and famous of New York. ‘The Clintons and photographer Eilen von Unwerth are our friends. And I have mingled with Jennifer Lopez, Gotham Chopra (son of Deepak Chopra), socialite songwriter Denise Rich’s daughter Daniella Rich and many more in the elite circle of New York,’ says Vikram.

Hailing from Faridkot, Sant Chatwal served as a pilot on the Indian Navy ship the *INS Vikrant* before he left for Ethiopia in the early ’70s. ‘The Maharaja of Faridkot sent me there. I spent seven years doing hotel business. When Ethiopia nationalized businesses, I lost about four million dollars.’

Sant Chatwal left for the US in 1979 to start all over again. Apart from owning hotels, Sant Chatwal is also a realtor and a media owner. ‘I bought *News India* for half a million dollars to project India in the US. And I want to give it a good go.’

He also heads the Hemkunt Foundation that has centers around the world to impart the values of the Gurbani to the younger generation.

Under him, the International Punjabi Society has brought Punjabis all over the world together on a single platform.

Sant Chatwal’s neighbor Ranjit Singh Ghura has also played an exceptional role in community affairs. Born in London in 1937, he came to the US in 1975 because of “heavy discrimination” after the riots in Notting Hill.

Ghura’s father, Rawail Singh, was a successful businessman in Britain in the 1930s. ‘My father was the first president of London’s first gurdwara in Shepherd’s Bush and a staunch supporter of the Indian League. He supported Krishna Menon through the war years from 1939 till India’s independence.’

Ghura, who claims he was a multi-millionaire by the age of thirty-two, says, ‘In the 1930s we owned the Jaguar Sports Company. It did great business. When my father died in 1988, he said in his will that I should set up a foundation to promote Sikhism. So in 1994, I



(Top): Dr Avtar Singh has created a Fellowship at the University of California, Berkeley, for the civil engineering topper from his alma mater Punjab Engineering College, Chandigarh.

(Top right): Philanthropist Ranjit Ghura with his friend Kabir Bedi.

(Above): Ishar Singh Bindra (white beard) and his family, who have set up a Sikh Chair at Hofstra University, pose with university president, provost and dean in New York.



established the R.S. Ghura Foundation that has been helping children imbibe the values of the Gurbani and learn Punjabi. It distributes Sikh literature and takes kids to India every year. We have also helped the orphans of the 1984 riots through scholarships.'

A close friend of actor and politician Sunil Dutt, Ranjit Ghura says he was the founding member of the Nargis Dutt Foundation in 1981 and wrote its constitution. 'Sanjay Dutt was married at my place. We held a reception for them at Akbar Restaurant on Long Island.'

Ghura served as the president of the Nargis Dutt Foundation for three years from 1984 to 1987. 'During that period, we raised one million dollars and instituted the Nargis Dutt Intensive Care Unit at the Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai,' he says, strolling on the lawns of his house in Port Washington. His daughter, Tina Singh, is president of Investor Network. Based in Laguna Beach near Los Angeles, she raises capital for mutual funds.

Another New York Sikh, who has made an immense contribution to society and the Sikh community, is Ishar Singh Bindra of Long Island.

The octogenarian Bindra, who moved to New York in 1979 after retiring from the Indian telecom department, is a founder-trustee of the Sikh Forum of New York and a senior vice-president of the Hemkunt Foundation.

Born at Kallar near Rawalpindi in 1921, Bindra had a distinguished career in telecom before moving to the US where he started a garment business with his two sons, Kuldip and Tejinder. Today, he heads the Jeetish Group of Companies with interests in garments, real estate and trading. He owns shopping centers on Long Island and has ventured into a five-star hotel project.

His biggest contribution was the endowment of the Kuljit Kaur Bindra Chair of Sikh Studies at Hofstra University in New York in 2000. Named after his wife, the Chair will focus on the study of Sikhism. He has also set up the Kuljit Kaur Bindra Charitable Trust to promote humanitarian causes. For his services to society, Bindra was given the 1999 Humanitarian of the Year Award by the Interfaith Nutrition Network and honored by the Nargis Dutt Foundation.

Next on his agenda is a Sikh school on the East Coast of the US.

Bindra was felicitated as Prominent Punjabi of the Year by Hillary Clinton at the International Punjabi Society gathering in New York in July 2000.

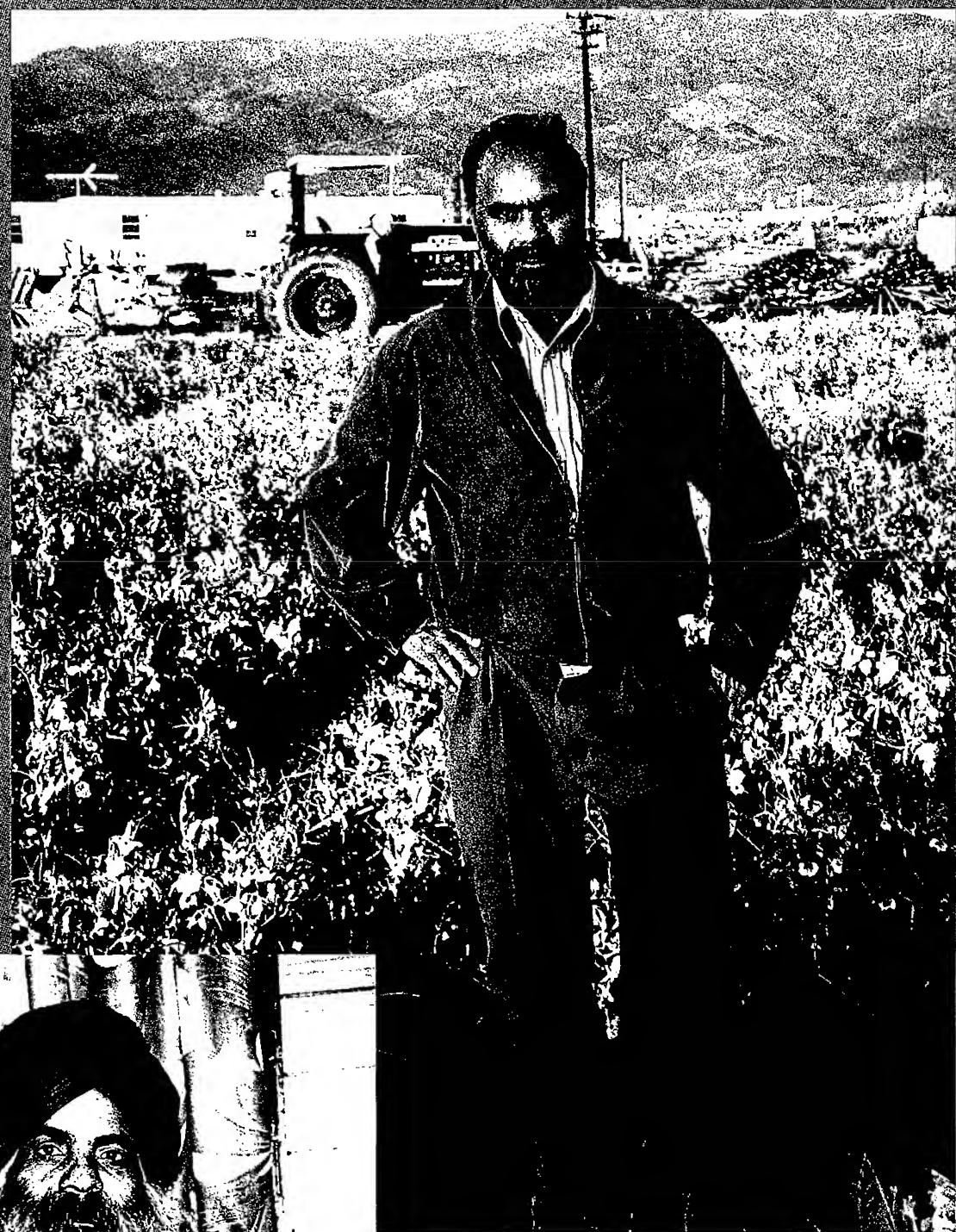
His son, Tejinder Bindra, feted by Nassau County Executive Tom Gullotta, is the founder of the Sikh Organization of New York and the first Asian member of the Board of the United Ways of Long Island.

Los Angeles-based Awtar Singh, the septuagenarian geo-technical forensic expert, has "pre-paid" for a seat for the topper of Punjab Engineering College to pursue Masters in civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley.

Named after his late wife Teji Singh, the Fellowship is a continuous one. 'I have donated \$500,000 for the Fellowship. The 30,000-dollar annual interest on this sum would take care



(Left): Didar Singh Bains, who owns more than 16,000 acres, is known as the 'peach king' of California.



(Above): Harbhajan Singh Samra, whom *The New York Times* describes as the 'okra king' of California, surveys his crops at his farms near Palm Springs in California.

of fees, books and board and lodging expenses for the one-year Masters course. The first recipient Arvinder Chopra landed a 75,000-dollar job with Chevron immediately on completing his Masters,' he says.

The Fellowship, he says, is his endeavor to help the brightest Indian kids to study at the world's best university. 'It was my dream. Mind you, the Indian kids are the brightest in the world. But the Indian system stifles them.'

Dr Awtar Singh came to the US in 1962 to earn his Masters and Ph.D. from Berkeley. He started from scratch. 'I used to survive on one dollar a day before I went to teach at Berkeley. Today, I earn more than two thousand dollars a day,' says Singh, who has also established a fully endowed Fellowship at the University of Colorado.

The Sikh farmers are not far behind.

Everyone seems to know Didar Singh Bains.

He is the king of peaches in California. Didar Singh cultivates peaches, prunes, almonds and grapes on his vast farms, hops across his ranch in a twin-engine plane, leads Sikh festivities in Northern California and donates liberally to charities.

His roots run deep in North America.

As he narrates in chaste Punjabi, 'My great-grandfather, Dit Singh, was among the first Sikhs to land in Canada in 1890. Later, my grandfather joined him in 1920, and they moved to California. My father came in 1948.'

Didar Singh, with his family, joined his father in 1958. 'I was nineteen when I left my native Nangal Khurd village near Hoshiarpur,' he says. The young Didar started his American dream with twenty-seven acres. By 2002, he owned more than sixteen thousands acres!

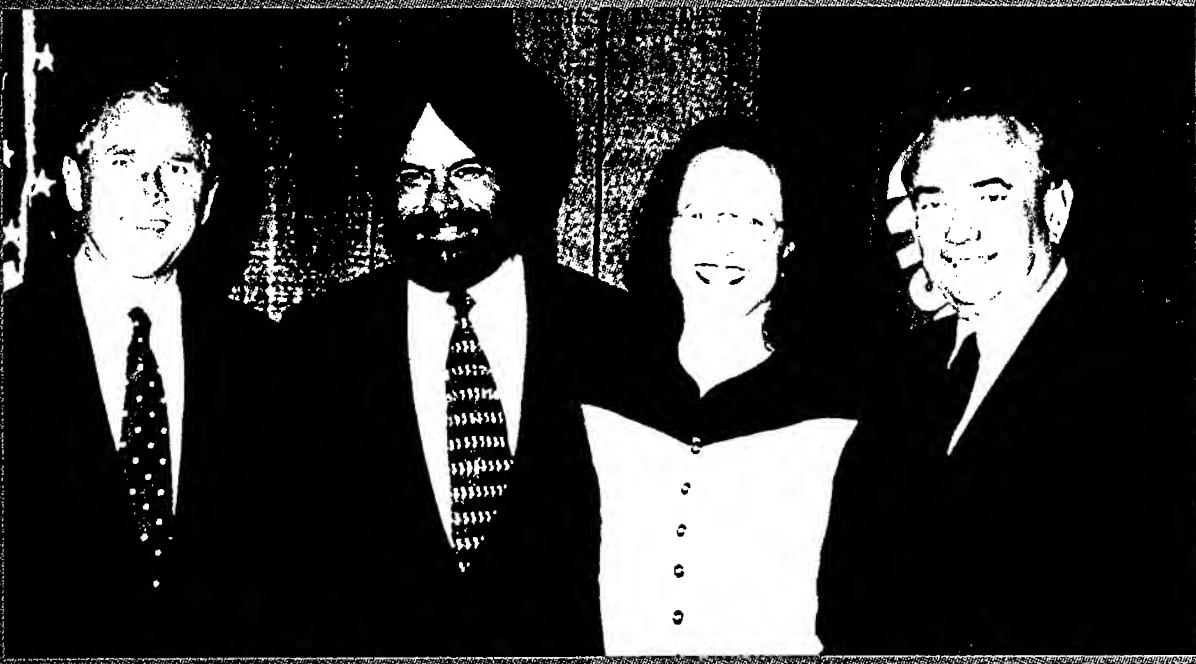
'We produce more than thirty thousand tonnes of peaches a year. Plus, we devote two thousand acres to almond crop,' he says.

A devout Sikh, Didar Singh leads the yearly *Guru Maniyo Granth* celebration parade in Yuba City in Northern California that has a population of twenty thousand Sikhs. 'We get more than sixty thousand people from all over the world for the celebrations. The parade follows a week-long session of devotional songs and speeches at the city gurdwara.' Interestingly, the parade is led by "Panj Piaras" carrying the US and California flags. 'The scene resembles a Punjab mela,' says Didar Singh.

As part of his contribution to the tercentenary of the Khalsa, Didar Singh hired the world famous Jewish architect Moshe Safdie from Boston for one crore rupees to design the Anandpur Sahib complex.

If Didar Singh is the king of peaches, Harbhajan Singh Samra is the undisputed "king of okra" in California.

Samra, who came to the US in 1985, has carved out a niche for himself in Indian specialities — okra, bitter melon and beans — in just five years.



(Top): THE SIKH GAS JOCKEY OF THE US.  
Standing next to President George Bush,  
Darshan Singh Dhaliwal has more than 800  
gas stations across the US.

(Above): Beneka Balu became the first Sikh  
girl to enlist in the US Army in the year  
2000 when she joined the 82nd Airborne  
Division after graduating from the West Point  
Military Academy.

(Left): Prof Swarnjit Singh Arora of  
Wisconsin University

His farms near Palm Springs produce the 'best quality' okra in the US. With a turnover of more than twelve million dollars in 2002, Samra sends his produce as far as Vancouver, Toronto, Chicago and New York.

An MA in economics, Samra says, 'I was looking for something in which I could create a niche for myself. Okra was my choice. I want to sell okra to the whole of North America and Europe.'

Landing at Fresno in California in 1985, young Samra first worked on farms and then moved to LA to work as a security guard. 'My evening shift gave me plenty of time in the morning. I thought of supplementing my income by buying vegetables and supplying them to Indian restaurants and stores. I bought a pick-up truck in 1990 and sold vegetables and mangoes to stores. Then I bought a bigger truck and rented a warehouse. Within a year, I saturated the LA area with supplies,' he says, while picking peas in his farms near Palm Springs, California.

To consolidate his gains and expand, Samra started farming okra in 1994. But because of the poor soil, the crop failed and he was in debt. After a three-year break, he was back at what he does best: growing okra once again. 'This time I chose the right soil.'

By 2002, Samra was selling two truckloads of okra every week in New York City alone.

Two other Californian Sikh farmers who have carved out a niche for themselves are Charanjit Singh Bath and Gurcharan Dhillon. The former is famous for growing quality grapes.

Owing more than eight hundred gas stations across the States, Darshan Singh Dhaliwal of Milwaukee is the gas jockey of America.

Hailing from Rakhra village in Patiala district, Dhaliwal came to the US as a student in 1972 for higher studies. 'First I came to North Dakota and later moved to Milwaukee to do a degree in industrial engineering in 1976.'

Then his entrepreneurial instinct took over. In 1977, he rented his first unit: the Elite Gas Station. 'Within two years I bought my first gas station,' he says.

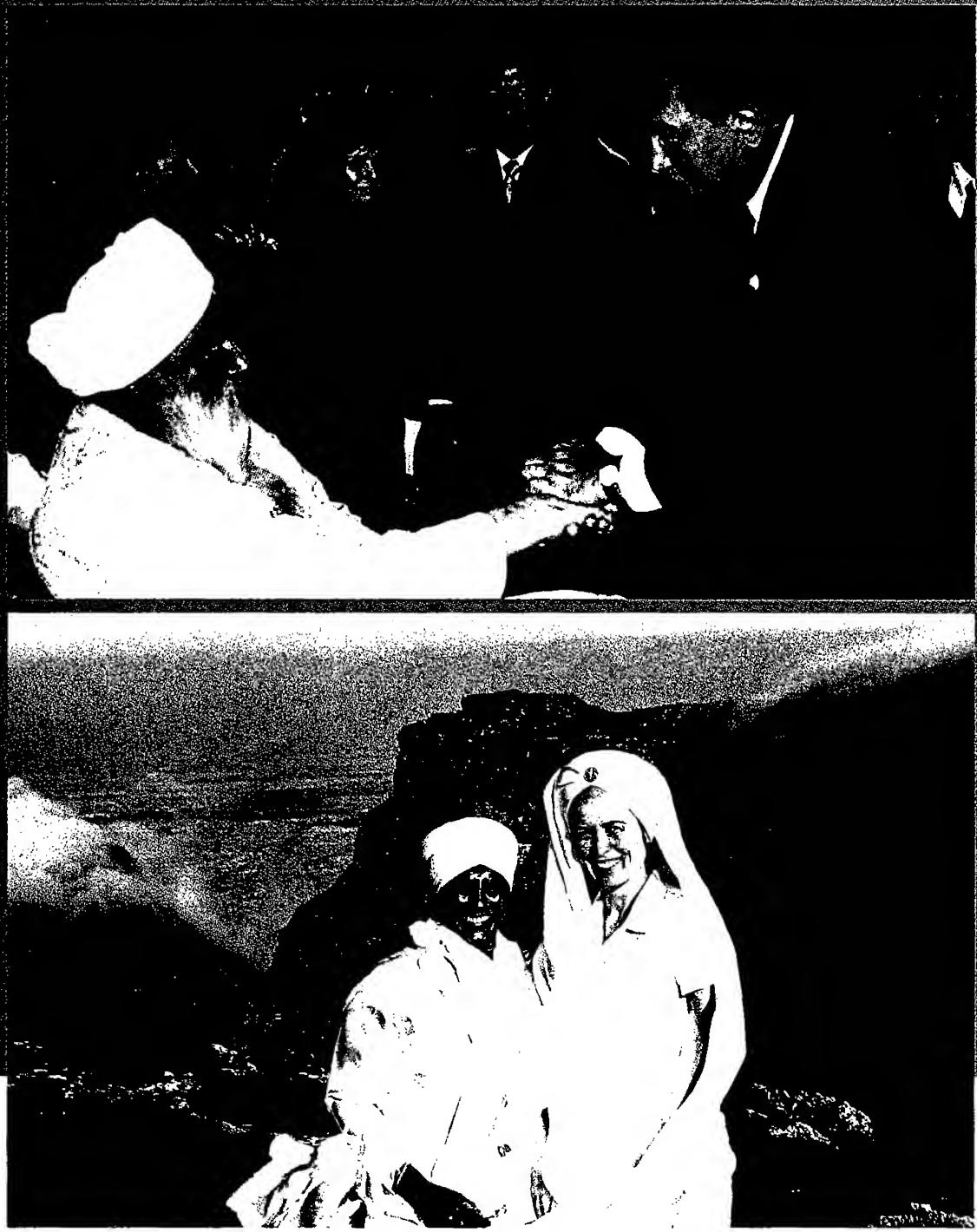
Dhaliwal has been buying gas stations since.

'Yes, one led to the other... The big break came in 1986 when I bought forty-seven at a time. Today, I run more than eight hundred gas stations under the Bulk Petroleum Corporation. I have got more than five thousand people on my staff.'

In 2002, Dhaliwal's annual turnover was pegged at more than one billion dollars!

Dhaliwal takes a keen interest in education. He supports three Chairs at the University of Wisconsin. Set up in memory of his father Kartar Singh, these are the Kartar Singh Dhaliwal Professorship of Punjab and Indian Studies, the Kartar Singh Dhaliwal Professorship of Political Science (SE Asia), and the Kartar Singh Dhaliwal Professorship of Economics.

For years, he has brought Indian students on scholarships to Wisconsin. In March 1999, he took the Wisconsin governor to Punjab to explore the possibility of setting up a branch of



(Top): Yogi Harbhajan, who is known for his proximity to powerful people, congratulating New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson on his inauguration on January 1, 2003.

(Above): Mrs Harbhajan Yogi (left) too has devoted herself to promoting Sikhism in America.

the University of Wisconsin at Chandigarh. ‘The branch aims at imparting education in Punjab for the first two years to those students who will later move to the US,’ says Dhaliwal.

After 9/11, he, with other community leaders, met President Bush to express concern about the safety of Sikhs across the US.

Married to an American named Deborah, Dhaliwal has six children — Jaspal, Gurpal, Ranjit, Tina, Amrit and Simrat.

Dhaliwal attributes his success to ‘God’s grace, good ethics and big dreams.’

Praising Dhaliwal, Prof Swarnjit Singh Arora of Wisconsin University says, ‘Darshan shares his good fortune with others. When I came here in 1966, there were hardly any Sikh students in Wisconsin. Thanks to Darshan’s efforts, we have dozens of them today. He has made a huge difference to the profile of the Sikh community.’

Another Sikh who has made a big difference to the profile of the community in the US is Yogi Harbhajan Singh.

A former excise inspector in Delhi, Yogi Harbhajan Singh quit his job and left for the US in 1968 to promote Sikhism in the western hemisphere. Under his influence, many Whites, Blacks and Hispanics have embraced Sikhism.

In Yogi’s words, his 3HO (Holy, Healthy and Happy Organization) teaches a ‘humanistic and holistic approach to life’ to his followers.

Author of many books on Yoga and Kundalini, Yogi Harbhajan says Indian philosophy will pave the way for peace on the earth in the age of information technology.

3HO is a worldwide organization, with more than three hundred centers.

Under the aegis of the International Kundalini Yoga Association and the Kundalini Research Institute, these centers teach Kundalini Yoga and the Sikh way of life. Yogi’s 3HO SuperHealth, a successful addiction treatment program, has been rated as one of the top ten therapies in the US. It runs a hugely successful Khalsa Clinic on Beverly Hills. In 1989, Yogi Harbhajan successfully persuaded the then Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachov to start several de-addiction centers in the Soviet Union.

Bestowed with the title of “Siri Singh Sahib” by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Yogi Harbhajan has promoted understanding of the Sikh religion through inter-religious dialogues with the Pope, the Dalai Lama, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other religious leaders.

Based at Espanola in New Mexico (US), Yogi Harbhajan has been a “personal advisor” to governors and other leaders since the 1970s. ‘When Yogi Harbhajan throws a birthday party every August at the New Mexico Sikh community’s ashram, South of Espanola, the guest list usually reads like a Who’s Who of state politics. That and their Peace Prayer Day in the summer. It’s smart not to miss these two occasions,’ an article in the Sante Fe *New Mexican* newspaper says, adding that the Sikh community has influence beyond its size in the US.



(Top): Yogi Harbhajan with his followers.

(Above): Yogi's White followers in Los Angeles are led by Kirtan Singh (in yellow patka).

(Left): Rajinder Bammi and son are Yogi's devout followers.



About his philosophy, Yogi Harbhajan says, 'Man is handicapped. He is into drugs and alcohol to get over this handicap. We try to get him out of this morass by teaching him a synthesis of Indian philosophy, religion and yoga. Yoga gives you the power to project yourself properly. Only then can you see things in perspective. The East offers the right solution. But we have not been understood properly in the West.'



After a brief pause, he adds, 'The bharatiya sanskriti is a three thousand-year-old written document. It is the laboratory of the human mind. And it offers solutions to your problems. When Indira Gandhi gave the slogan 'Garibi Hatao', I asked her: Madam, what poverty are we talking about? We have the power of the mind. The West has the power of the machine. Buy this machine and the Indian mind will do wonders.'

Yogi Harbhajan says his Guru Ramdas Ashrams across the US are the center of his work. 'The concept was formulated in the '70s when everything was upside down in American society. There was the Hippie movement and protests. I told the youngsters that Indian sanskriti is the answer. This is the age of the Aquarius. Celestial changes are in the offing, setting off huge fluctuations in the magnetic field. Then this information technology is leaving us puzzled. Man will flee. But he will come back. Everyone — rich, poor, sick, and healthy — has to come back to find the nucleus of his being.'

'The right balance comes when you find yourself within you, you find your Creator within you and yourself. We chant no Mantras. When someone comes to 3HO, we note down his weaknesses, gauge his nervous activities, search his thought process, measure his confidence level, understand his sexual and food habits. Then we tell him what will suit him. We don't differentiate between religions. We teach all the scriptures — the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the *Bhagwad Gita*, and the *Koran*. We even teach Omar Khayyam and Bulle Shah. There are three words for everyone to understand: doubt, karma (action) and dharma. One who lives in doubt does not live at all. The action-reaction chain is a tragedy of modern age. Dharma is the call of duty. If you kill a man, you are convicted. But if a soldier kills a man, he is not convicted. That's his dharma. One should follow true dharma. When I came here, the first thing I did was the promotion of vegetarianism. Today, one-fourth of America is vegetarian.'

Opposed to donations, Yogi Harbhajan started his own small businesses in the '70s. 'Today, we have fourteen corporations under the 3HO Foundation. We are into computers, foodstuff, and health promotion. Our Akal Security is one of the best in the US. Among our clients are Coca Cola, Thomson Consumer Electronics, Phelps Dodge Mining, Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, and Yellow Freight. We provide protective services to the Hawaii State Airports Authority, the state of New Mexico, the US Army, Navy and Air Force, the US Marshals Service, and others. Akal is the largest provider of court security services to the US Marshals. Worldwide, more than seven thousand Akal officers provide security services to business and government facilities,' Yogi Harbhajan explains.

*Yogi Tea* is well known in the US.



Inder Singh, who is considered the "live-wire of the Indians" in southern California, with his friend George Bush Sr. He says he is probably the only Indo-American who has hosted two serving Presidents — Giani Zail from his native India and President Bush Sr.

'After promoting the Sikh way of life and vegetarianism, we now intend to promote ayurveda in the West. For this purpose, Yogi plans an ayurveda university in India where people will be trained and sent to the West,' says his daughter, Kamaljit Kaur.

Yogi's White follower and head of protocol, Kirtan Singh, says, 'His magnetism changed our lives the day we came in contact with him. He has given us a balanced life.' Adds Michigan physicist Jasprit Singh, who, along with his wife Teresa Singh, has done an illustrated book on Sikhism, 'Yogi's interpretation of the scriptures is so strong that it is impossible to remain unaffected.'

Back in the '60s, when Sikhs were few and far between in the US, Jaswant Singh Premi of New York brought them together on a single platform: the International Punjabi Society (IPS). Since then, the IPS has been meeting every year to debate Sikh issues and felicitate its heroes.

It is Halloween Day, and the Premi family is pampering kids in their Port Washington residence in New York. Stirred by the memories of her late husband, Mrs Sharan Premi says, 'Just about every Indian in New York knew Premiji. He quit his job with the Handicrafts and Handloom Export Corporation to export garments to New York. So we came here in 1964. Whosoever came from India met Premiji. We hosted Zakir Husain, Giani Zail Singh, Dr Shanker Dayal Sharma, I.K. Gujral, Parkash Singh Badal and Manmohan Singh.'

On the US West Coast, Inder Singh set the ball rolling for community consolidation by organizing collective celebrations of festivals in the early '80s.

As a founding-member of GOPIO, he is considered one of the best-known South Asian faces in America.

Stanley Wolpert, a South Asian expert at UCLA, rates Inder Singh as the foremost Indian in the US. Noted American historian Karen Leonard lists him among the sixteen prominent South Asians in the country.

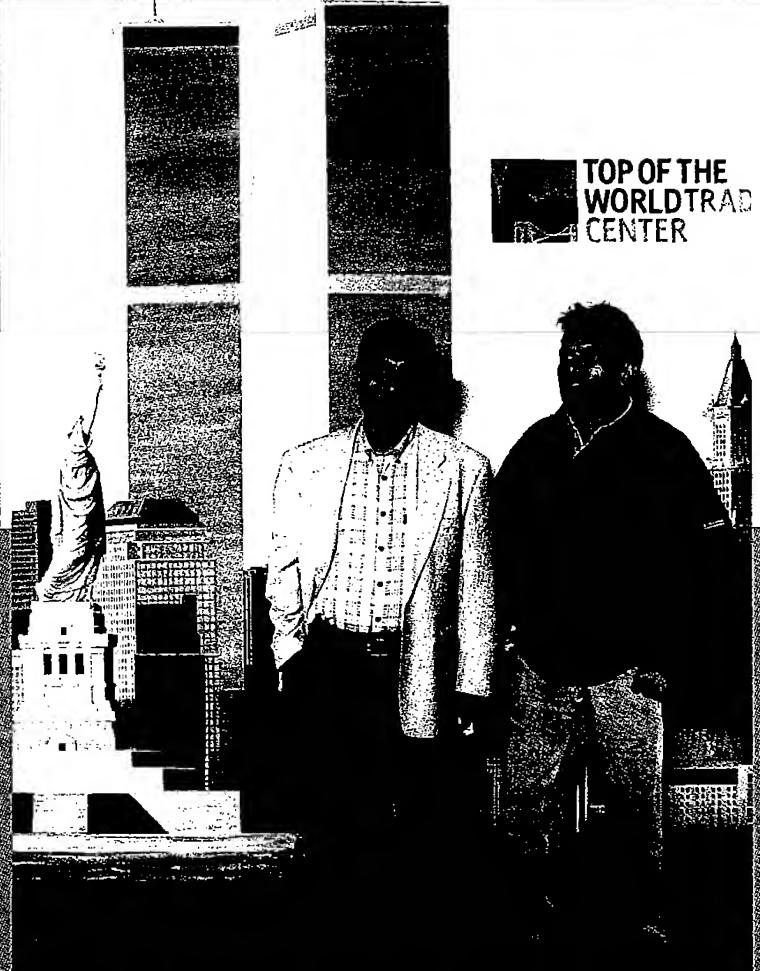
His face lights up when Inder Singh shows you the invitations from Ronald Reagan, George Bush Sr. and George W. Bush for their inauguration. Richard Celeste, the US ambassador in New Delhi in the late '90s, is his close friend.

'Not a day goes by when we don't host someone,' says his wife, Deepi Singh, who quit as vice-principal of the Home Science College in Chandigarh and moved to California.

A Los Angeles resident since 1968, Inder Singh has been rightly called the "live-wire of the Indian community" in Southern California. He is credited with organizing the first-ever Baisakhi celebrations in Southern California in 1979. He is credited with knitting California's Indian organizations into the Federation of Indian Associations (FIA).

He is also credited with bringing together various Indian organizations in the US into the National Federation of Indian Associations (NFIA) in 1980.

The NFIA has fought and won many battles since then.



(Top left) The Premis' household in New York was the first stop for new immigrants from India in the '60s.

(Top right) Dr Rajen Singh Anand was the highest-ranking Indian to serve in the Clinton Administration.

(Above) Mohinder Singh edits *India Journal* in Los Angeles.

(Right) Baldev Grewal (left), who launched *Sher-e-Punjab* weekly from New York in 1999, seen at the World Trade Center.

Looking over the lush Fernando Valley below his residence in Tarzana, Inder Singh says, ‘Senator Kennedy introduced a Bill in 1986 to cut immigration quotas. We lobbied hard for four years. The Bill fell through. In 1987, the US planned a package for Pakistan, including AWACS planes. We marched through Washington to highlight the dangerous consequences of AWACS. In the end, Pakistan got no plane. In 1988, the US Census Bureau wanted to eliminate many categories under the term “Asian”. Congress had passed the Bill and President Reagan okayed it. But our protests forced the President to suspend it.’

To bring the Indian diaspora on a single platform, Inder Singh and like-minded friends gathered in New York and floated GOPIO in 1989.

‘We meet every year. During the Fiji crisis, we passed a resolution saying that any attack on Indians anywhere in the world will be considered an attack on the whole NRI community. In the early 1990s, we pressured India to give PIO cards, if not dual citizenship, to NRIs. Anyhow, the PIO scheme came into force. GOPIO welcomes the dual citizenship decision by the Vajpayee government,’ says Inder Singh, who is aligned with the Republican Party.

His friend, Dr Rajen Anand, served as the executive director of the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion in Washington, and was the highest-ranking Indian to serve in the Clinton Administration. As part of his job, he completed a report called “Dietary Guidelines for the Americans”.

Meerut-born Anand received his Ph.D. in physiology, biochemistry and nutrition from the University of California (Davis) in 1969 and joined the California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), in 1970.

An eloquent speaker, Anand has served on the National Committee on Foreign Medical Education and Accreditation, the American Association for Advancement of Science, the American Physiological Society, and the American Society for Nutritional Sciences.

Speaking about Sikhs in the media, Baldev Singh Grewal started the first-ever Punjabi paper *Sher-e-Panjab* from New York. Formerly with *Ajit* in Jalandhar, Baldev Singh moved to the US in the early '80s and worked as a gas jockey before tying up with *India Abroad* to launch the Punjabi weekly in 1999.

Mohinder Singh, a former deputy press secretary to the late President Giani Zail Singh, started the first-ever Indian publication in English from Los Angeles: *India Journal*. ‘When I came to Los Angeles to join my family in 1986, there was no Indian publication from LA. I launched *India Journal* in June 1988,’ says Mohinder Singh, whose son, Navneet Singh Chugh, is an accountant by profession.

Curiously, Madame Tussaud’s equivalent in Hollywood — the Hollywood Wax Museum — is owned by a Sikh named Spoony Singh.

Standing in front of the museum on Hollywood Boulevard, he says, ‘Hmm ... when I came from Vancouver, I wanted to do something related to showbiz. So, I set up this museum. It was my dream. We have more than 200 wax replicas of Hollywood stars — past and

(Below): Spoony Singh inside his Hollywood Wax Museum on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles.

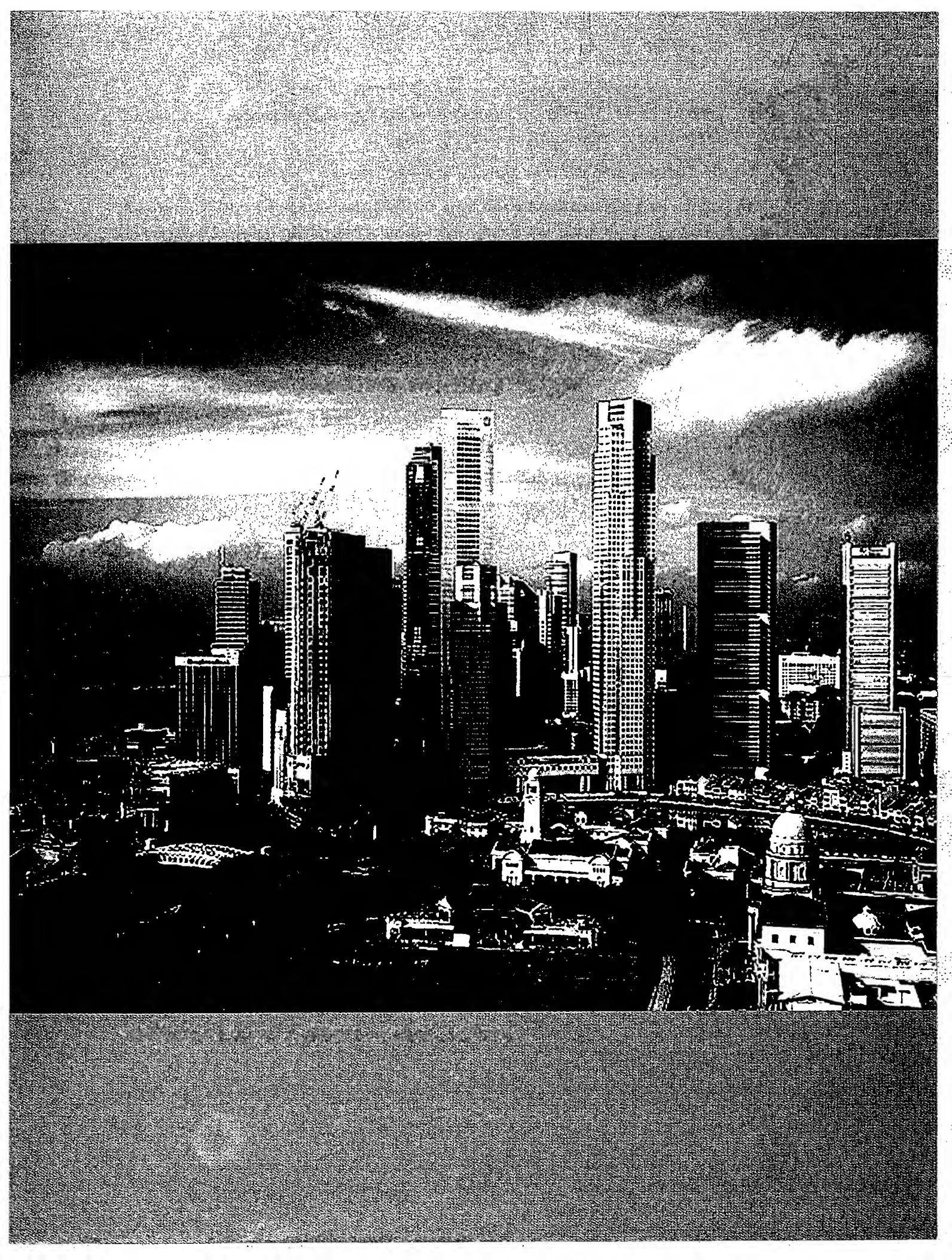
(Right): The entrance to the museum.



present. Then we have "Chambers of Horror" featuring Dracula, Frankenstein, etc. We get over 300,000 visitors every year. My dream is thriving.'

Yes, the Sikh dream in the US is thriving.

'In fact, the next Sikh renaissance will happen outside Punjab and we NRI Sikhs would like to do what we can to bring that about,' says Gurinder Singh Mann of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Amen.





# SINGAPORE:

## BEST IN THE EAST



Singapore is an immigrant society. Our values are those which ensure security, survival and success: so said former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Tejinder Singh, my co-passenger on the long trans-Pacific flight from Los Angeles to Singapore, is well clued into Sikh affairs in his island nation. Filling me in on the state of the community in Singapore, he says, 'Though we 18,000 Sikhs account for just half a per cent of the Singapore population, we have eaten more than our share of the national cake. Singapore is the only country where we have not only thrived, but also preserved our *bana-besh* (the Sikh symbols).'

With a wink, he adds, 'We don't name our kids Mike Singhs or Peter Singhs. We call them Gurpreet, Maninder and Ajit Singhs and Kaurs. Come along with me on the weekend and I will show how Sikh boys and girls swot up Punjabi lessons. Sikhism is thriving in Singapore, as are Sikhs. You will see them everywhere.'

The scene at Singapore's Changi Airport at that unearthly hour bears him out. Turbaned Sikhs man counters. Sikh families stand in check-in queues. Others are pouring out of the airport.

The day breaks clear and bright. And it is Sunday.

A swing through High Street, Anson Road, Queen Street, Wilkie Road, and Selegie Road and Tanjong Pagar Road gives you a glimpse into the Sikh world in Singapore. Gleaming Mercedes and BMWs roll towards Katong, Towner, Bukit Merah and Wilkie Sikh temples. All the nine gurdwaras are packed to their capacity. Loudspeakers blare the kirtan.

'That is how we spend our Sundays,' says Darbara Singh, treasurer of the Khalsa Dharmak Sabha gurdwara off Little India on Serangoon Road.

Driving two miles to the east, you reach the Singapore Khalsa Association on Tessensohn Road. 'It is another hub of Sikh activities. The Association was set up in 1931 for preserving Punjabi language and culture. It held Punjabi classes from 1970 to 1995,' says Param Ajeet Singh Bal, a retired civil servant.

Giving Lee Kuan Yew credit for the Sikhs' success, Bal says, 'He picked up the best in every sphere, irrespective of ethnicity. Sikhs have a very large representation in politics, the judiciary, the army, the city police, businesses and professions.'

Indeed, tycoon Kartar Singh Thukral is one of the richest Sikhs in South-East Asia.

Justice Choor Singh rose to become the first Sikh judge of the Singapore Supreme Court.

In the eighty-five-member Singapore Parliament, there are two Sikh MPs — Inderjit Singh and Davinder Singh. The latter is Singapore's topmost lawyer and a senior counsel.

Dr (Mrs) Kanwaljit Soin is rated as one of the best doctors on the island.

She was Singapore's first woman to become an orthopaedic in the '70s. Later she became the first woman to be nominated as an MP for two terms — from 1992 to 1996. Her equally famous husband, Amarjeet Singh, retired as a judicial commissioner from the Supreme Court in 2001.

Sat Pal Khattar runs one of the biggest law firms in the country and is a member of the Public Service Commission.

Many Sikhs, including Jaspal Singh, Daljit Singh, Param Ajeet Singh Bal and Ajit Singh, have distinguished themselves in the civil service.

Dozens of Sikhs hold very high ranks in the army.

Jagjit Singh, who retired in 2001, rose to become the deputy commissioner of the city police.

Jaswant Singh Gill was the first chief of the Singapore Navy. Superintendent Sardara Singh served as the head of the traffic police.

Prof Kirpal Singh of Singapore Management University is an internationally acclaimed scholar on Aldous Huxley. He has brought fame to the Sikh community through his English poetry and active participation in radio/TV/newspaper debates.

Associate Professor Balbir Singh is an expert on security matters and Indonesian affairs.

Both the universities in Singapore teach Sikh programmes.

Historically, the Sikhs were first brought to Singapore in 1881 to serve as policemen, security guards and night watchmen. Many became moneylenders.

And the old labels stuck. 'Though the second and third generation Sikhs have graduated to law, medicine and accountancy, they are still perceived as a community of security guards and petty moneylenders,' says Justice Choor Singh, in his book titled *Understanding Sikhism*.



As these gatherings show, Singapore Sikhs are strict about their religious symbols.

But the stereotyping is giving way to a new progressive image as more and more Sikhs go up the ladder, says journalist Gurdip Singh.

Curiously, the first Sikhs in Singapore were addressed as Bengalis. Why? Because Sir Stamford Raffles, who founded Singapore in 1819, had brought many Bengali servants with him from Calcutta. So, every Indian came to be known as Bengali.

The first Sikh to land in Singapore in 1850 was Bhai Maharaj Singh who had fought the British in Punjab after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Lord Dalhousie sent Maharaj Singh to Singapore as a state prisoner. He died in 1856.

Later, more Sikh convicts were sent to Singapore — the capital of the Straits Settlements. On their release, many settled down in Singapore.

As the Singapore Khalsa Association Journal says, 'In 1879, a Commission of Inquiry set up by the Straits Settlements Police Force recommended the induction of a Sikh contingent into the force as a means of bolstering it. British officers, who had served in the Punjab, were evidently impressed by the performance of the Sikhs as sepoys and sought their services in the Straits Settlements as well. Consequently, in 1881, 165 Sikhs were brought to the island to form the Sikh contingent.'

#### Why were Sikh soldiers needed in Singapore and Malaya?

As Prof Kernail Singh Sidhu says, when the British took possession of these areas they did not trust the Chinese and Malays for security needs. They brought in Europeans who didn't meet with much success. In desperation, the British turned to the Sikhs who helped them subdue the Chinese secret societies and gangsters.

Statistics show there were 195 Sikhs in Singapore in 1911: 2,988 in 1931: 2,196 in 1947: 3,405 in 1957: and 12,000 in 1971.

In 2002, the Sikh population in the island nation was 18,000.

Tycoon Kartar Singh Thakral tops the list.

His Thakral Group is one of Singapore's largest companies, operating in more than forty countries and employing thousands of people.

With an annual turnover of over \$2.5 billion (in 2002), the group deals in textiles, electronics, real estate, hospitality and financial and consultancy services.

Ranked as Singapore's Most Enterprising Privately Owned Company in 1995 by Arthur Anderson, the Thakral Brothers kicked off in 1952 with textiles.

It became a limited company in 1973. Today it operates in trading, contract manufacturing and information technology.

The Group owns fifteen brands of audio-visual, telecommunication and household products that are sourced from Japan and sold in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Indo-China. Another company owned by the group, Thakral Corporation Ltd, is a leading distributor of electronics/electrical goods.



The humble Kartar Singh Thakral is one of the richest Sikhs in South-East Asia. His group, Thakral Brothers, operates in more than 40 countries, employing thousands of people.

Thakral Holdings, the holding company of the group, owns a chain of hotels, resorts and shopping complexes in Australia.

In fact, Thakral Holdings is still one of Australia's largest tourism-based groups. It owns the All Seasons Premier Menzies Hotel and the Wynyard and Retail Centre in Sydney, the All Seasons Premier Pacific Bay Resort in Coffs Harbour, the Novotel on Collins Hotel, Hilton on the Park, and the Collins Shopping Centre in Melbourne.

When Thakral was named the Businessman of the Year in 1995, the *Business Times* of Singapore wrote, 'being ahead has always been the name of Kartar Singh Thakral's game.'

Sitting in his Colombo Court office, the self-effacing tycoon nods in agreement.

'Yes, it pays to be the first. In the '60s, we already had contacts in China. The moment China opened up, we moved in,' he says.

In the early 1980s when colour TV was first launched in India, he was quick to seize the opportunity. While others worked out their numbers, he was already selling thousands of TVs in India.

Thakral's is a rags-to-riches saga.

As he once narrated in an interview, 'My father Sohan Singh was born in Pakistan towards the end of the nineteenth century. He was just ten years old when a plague-like disease wiped out our family members except my father and his younger brother. My father started working at a shop where an elderly Sikh from Thailand used to have breakfast. He liked my father. Since he had no children, he asked dad to accompany him to Thailand to assist him. My father worked with him for many years before starting his own clothing business. The Thai royal family became one of his customers. In 1905, he opened Punjab Store, and kept increasing his business till 1935 when he moved to Japan to start cloth import. When the War broke out, we (the British subjects) were sent back to Thailand. My education was virtually over at the age of nine.'

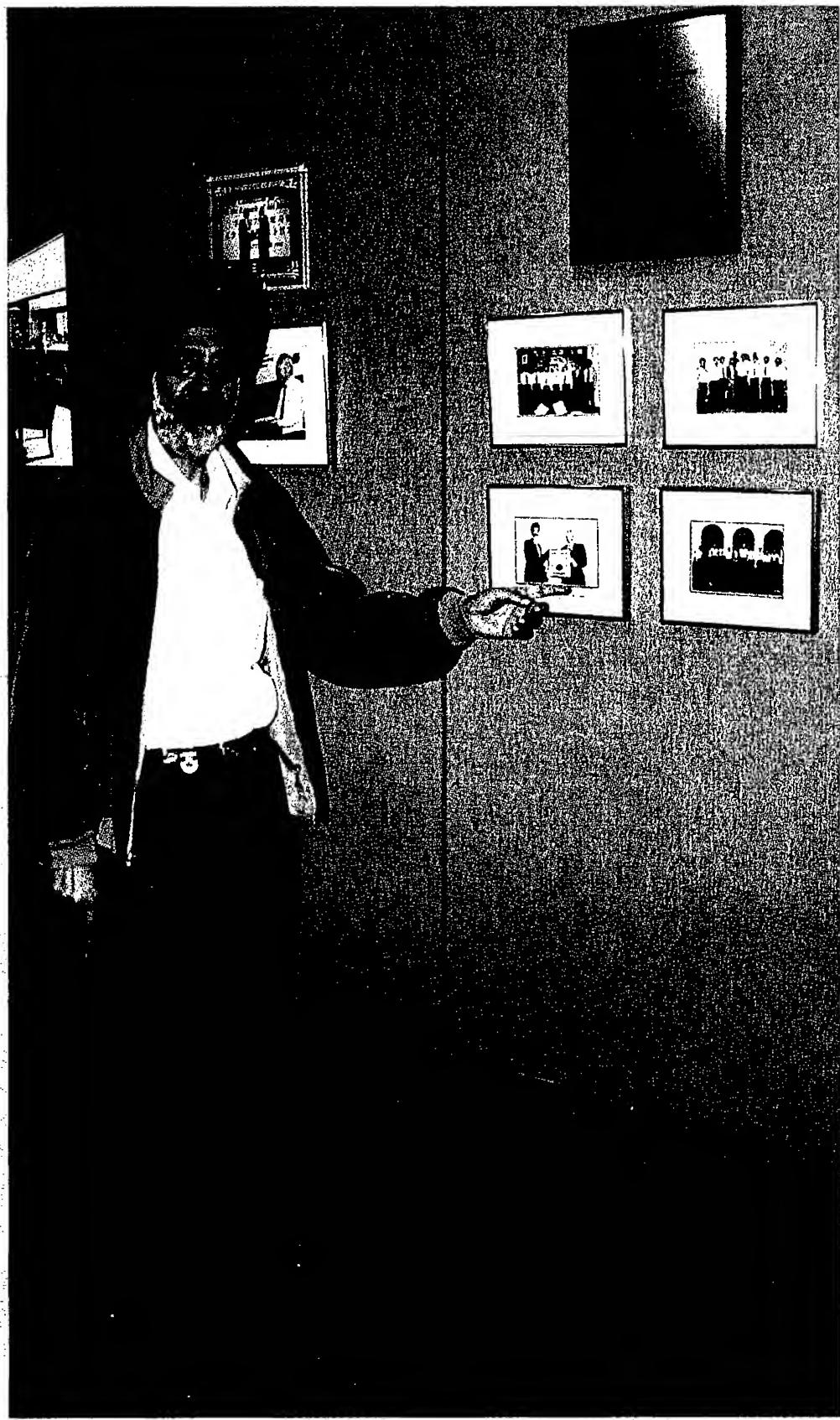
In 1952, nineteen-year-old Kartar Singh left for Singapore to source textiles for sale in Thailand.

From his corner textile store — Thakral Brothers — on High Street in the Central Business District of Singapore, his business grew by leaps and bounds.

As Kartar Singh once told an interviewer, 'If I tell you that this business is everything that I envisioned, it would be a lie. It has gone beyond what I imagined. We did not have a blueprint for success then, and we don't have one now. But we believed in modern management and started modernizing in the mid '70s.'

The turning point came in 1973 when his group moved into the electronics business. 'Today, it accounts for ninety per cent of our profits,' he says.

Born on 22 September 1933, Kartar Singh, the fifth child in a family of seven, does not believe in formal education. All his four sons, who work with him, have no university education. As he told Peter Church, who wrote a book titled *Added Value* on the leading businessmen of



Singapore's architect Lee Kuan Yew is a hero and role model for Kartar Singh Thakral.

South-East Asia, 'If one of my sons had gone to university and the others had not, the one who had might have looked down upon the others, and the others, in turn, might have looked up to my son who had been to university. I didn't want this to happen. I wanted them all to feel equal. If you wish to be a banker, a lawyer, or a doctor, certainly you need to study and go to university. However, if you wish to be a trader no Harvard MBA is going to help you. The key is to find each person's talent.'

What is his business philosophy?

'You must be extremely hard working and focused. Build upon small gains and diversify. Be honest with your suppliers and buyers. Both matter a lot because if you are not loyal to your suppliers, you will not have the goods at the right price. If you are not loyal to your buyers, you will not have them for a long period of time. You have to be fair to your creditors because banks are an important factor in business,' he says.

Looking at the future prospects, he says, 'India and China are very vital because of their growing populations and consumers. Europe is an ageing society. They are already awash with consumer goods. The US is a big, young nation, but there are a whole lot of problems in doing business there. Business in America is not conducted the way it is done in Asia where it is still largely family-run. If you want to start there, you need big funds. So, if you go wrong there, you can go wrong very badly. In Asia, even if you have setbacks, you can overcome them because of your relationships with suppliers and banks. In South-East Asia, you have setbacks every ten to twelve years, but you can recover.'

India, he says, is not conducive to doing business. 'Indians are slow in taking decisions. There is no discipline. Then there is rampant corruption. Look at the wages. A guy who ushers you in a five-star hotel gets ten thousand rupees per month while the hotel charges one hundred and fifty dollars per day from a guest. The same person who ushers you in a hotel in Singapore will get at least two thousand dollars. So, how can the common man in India survive on that income? India cannot be corruption-free. There are talented people in India, but the system does not allow them to grow.'

Blaming lack of political will for India's problems, Thakral says, 'Look how our Lee Kuan Yew turned his dreams into a reality. He picked up the best people, never hesitated to hire persons better than him. And he never surrounded himself with yes-men. That is what is needed in India.'

A devout Sikh, Kartar Singh attributes his success to God. 'I don't know if I have it. But if I do, it is probably a gift from God,' he told a magazine in 1998. 'I was very focused about following my father. He was my ideal — a good businessman, very honest, straightforward and simple. I thought to myself: That is how I would like to be. Besides, my father was also successful. In our generation, life was very focused. We did not have TV or radio. When you have too many choices in life, you become unfocused... Setbacks are like illnesses... If you are lucky, you survive the worst periods unscathed. If you are slightly unlucky, you might lose a little. If you are very unlucky, you might lose a lot — but not everything. The trick is to keep your presence of mind. Even in good times, keep your presence of mind. Move with the cycle and always be positive... It's all in the hands of God. If you plant lofty ideas in your mind, you



Choor Singh Sidhu (turbaned) was the first Sikh to become a judge in the Singapore Supreme Court.

are no longer yourself. You will be chasing the Big Dream all the time. I have peace of mind right now.'

Rising from his chair, Thakral says, 'Merit is the only criterion in Singapore and the Sikhs have done very well in every walk of life.'

The stern Choor Singh Sidhu, who became the first Sikh judge of the Singapore Supreme Court, is an equally respected figure in the island nation.

Born in India in 1911, Choor Singh was six years old when he came to Singapore with his mother to join his father. Young Choor Singh walked four miles every morning to attend the Pearls Hill Primary School. As his relative, Jaswant Singh Gill, says, 'Choor Singh had a tough childhood. He used to study under streetlights and take a bath at the public pipes. But he was a brilliant student.'

Choor Singh started his career as a clerk in the Singapore bankruptcy office where he developed an interest in the legal profession. He went to England for higher studies in law, came back and joined the legal profession.

He was called to the bar in 1948. The following year, he became the first Asian magistrate in Singapore. 'He became a district magistrate in 1955, a senior district judge in 1960 and a Supreme Court judge in 1963. He retired in 1976,' adds Jaswant Singh Gill.

Choor Singh has authored many books, including one on gambling that has become standard material for lawyers.

A founder-member of the Singapore Khalsa Association in 1931, Choor Singh later served as its president for six years. On his initiative as chairman of the Sikh Advisory Board in 1955, the Singapore government allowed the use of government school premises to teach Punjabi on weekends, adds Gill.

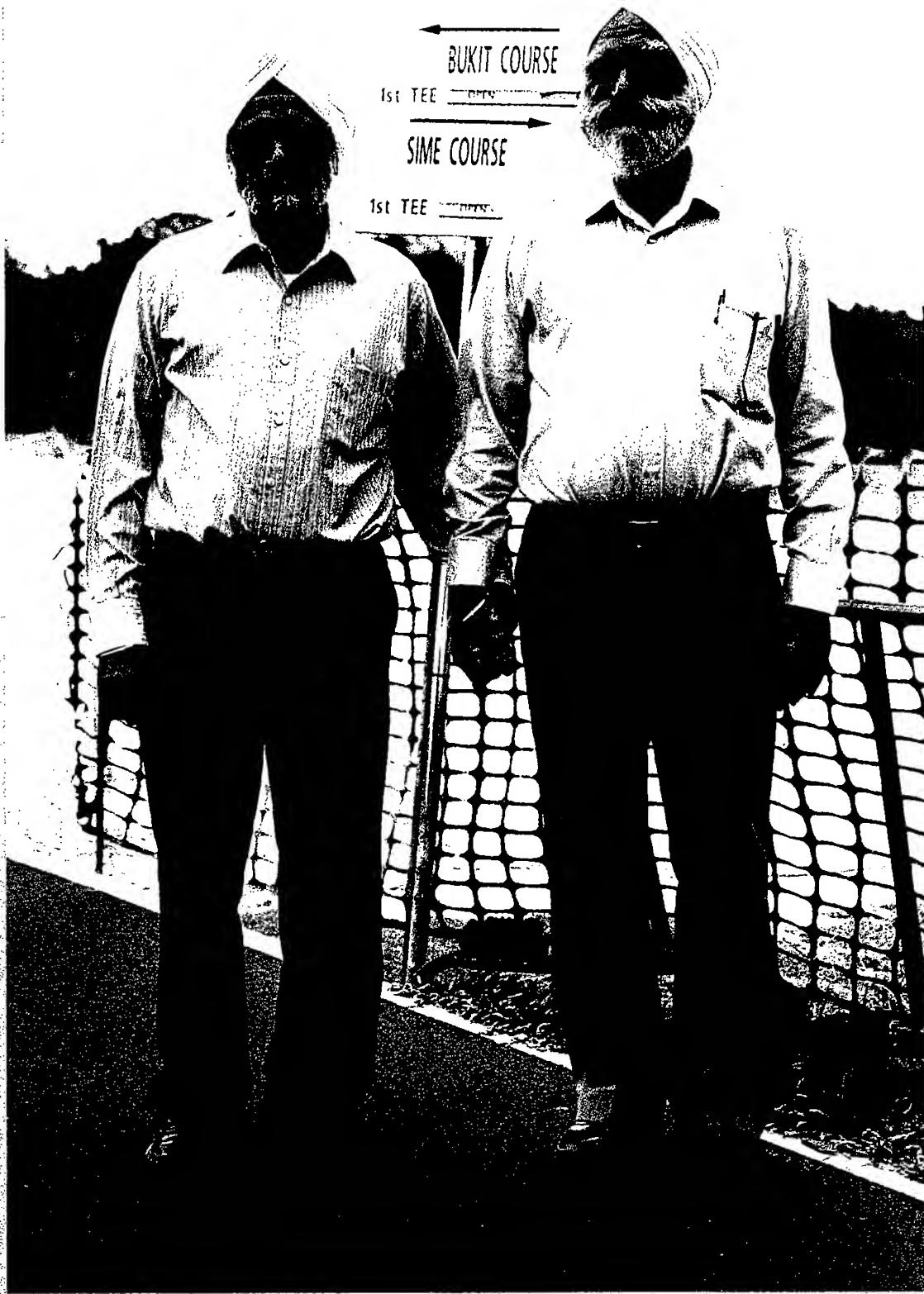
Gill himself was the first commander of the Singapore Navy. 'To begin with, I was a teacher. In 1948, I opted for the Royal Reserve Force. Starting as a private, I rose from the ranks to become the commander of the force. When the British left in 1968, I was made the first commander of the navy.'

He retired in 1971. His portrait in full naval regalia adorns the National Museum of Singapore.

Jaswant Singh Gill's bosom friend, Ajit Singh Gill, was the first Sikh hockey player to represent Singapore in the Olympics.

'I played as a fullback in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. The other Sikh players who have represented Singapore at various levels include Pritam Singh, Kartar Singh and Veer Singh,' says Ajit Singh Gill, sitting on the terrace of the Golf Link Club.

Whenever the Singapore Parliament convenes, two turbaned men stand out. Inderjit Singh and Davinder Singh are two Sikh MPs in the eighty-five-member parliament. 'These two young men have done us proud. They are listened to with attention,' says Kartar Singh Thakral.



Singapore's first Navy Commander, Jaswant Singh Gill (right), with Ajit Singh Gill who played hockey for Singapore at the Olympics.

Both represent the People's Action Party (PAP). Young Inderjit Singh was picked up for his excellent record in community service, and Davinder Singh for his professional standing.

Explains Inderjit Singh, 'In Singapore, politics is about community service. My party — the People's Action Party (PAP) — lays a lot of emphasis on it. You rise only through community service. Race is not an issue. We Sikhs are just half a per cent of the Singapore population, but we have two MPs.'

An engineering graduate and a Masters in Business Administration from Britain, Inderjit Singh worked for fourteen years for Texas Instruments. 'I left the company as a director in 1999 to start my own IT company,' he says.

As a student, he was active in college politics and community service. 'Impressed by my work, the PAP invited me to the selection process. In 1993, I was chosen to contest the 1996 election. It is a tedious process involving interviews, chats, etc.'

Inderjit Singh won. And he became the second Sikh MP after Davinder Singh.

A dynamic man, he spearheaded the year-long Khalsa tercentenary celebrations on the island in 1999.

Not surprisingly, the Singapore Sikhs call him "Mr Creativity".

His benchmate, Davinder Singh, is not only the first Sikh MP of Singapore, but also the topmost lawyer of the country and a senior counsel (Singapore's equivalent to Queen's counsel in Britain).

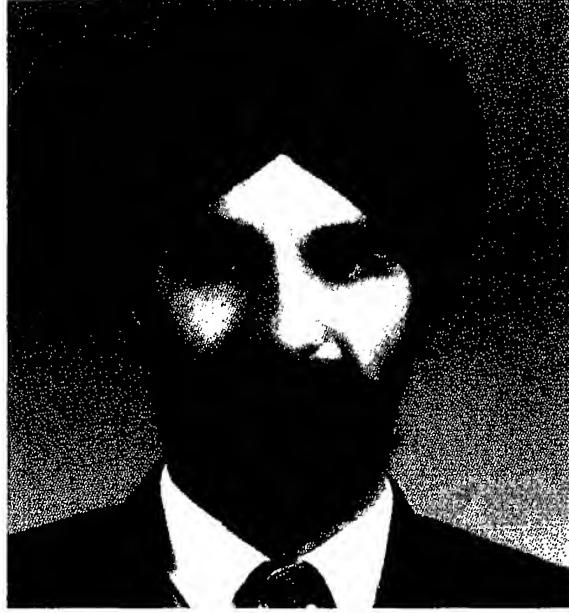
A graduate from the National University of Singapore, Davinder Singh has a trail-blazing record in his profession. He joined the litigation department of Drew & Napier in 1982 and later became its managing partner.

He was listed as one of Asia's top litigation lawyers for the year 2000 in the publication titled *Asia Law: Leading Lawyers*.

*Asia Pacific Legal-500* describes him as "the most respected individual litigator in the country". He is among the five Singaporeans listed in *An International Who's Who of Commercial Litigators*. Euromoney Legal Media Group's publication *Expert Guides* describes him as a leading insolvency lawyer.

A director of many companies, Davinder Singh has taken up many high-profile white-collar crime cases. He has also represented Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew in various lawsuits.

Praising the two Sikh MPs for raising the profile of the community in Singapore, the elderly Surjan Singh says, 'Thanks to Inderjit Singh and Davinder Singh, the Khalsa celebrations were a grand success. We organized shows, a Punjabi mela, the Sikh Festival of Sports and held debates that attracted Sikhs from Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. The Sikh Youth Adventure Group mounted an expedition to Africa's highest peak Mt Kilimanjaro. A national exhibition highlighted the valour of Sikh soldiers under the British. A grand dinner was held at the World Trade Centre. The celebrations ended with a Sikh Heritage Dinner in November.'



(Above): Young Inderjit Singh (centre), who is an MP in the 85-member parliament, is called 'Mr Creativity.' To his left is Bhajan Singh of the Singapore Sikh Education Foundation.

(Left): Davinder Singh is another Sikh MP as well as the country's topmost lawyer.

Surjan Singh, who has contributed immensely to the promotion of the Punjabi language, says, ‘Punjabi classes started in the 1940s at the Shri Guru Singh Sabha and the Khalsa Dharmak Sabha. In the 1970s, the Singapore Khalsa Association played a significant role. But then these centres closed as the emphasis was on the second language — which was either Chinese or Malay or Tamil. Sikh students chose Malay, but they didn’t do well. Recently, the government relaxed the requirement for the second language. So, Sikh students can take up Punjabi as their second language.’

Educationist Bhajan Singh is the renaissance man of the Sikh community in Singapore.

The Sikh Education Foundation that promotes Sikh heritage is his brainchild.

As he says, ‘In the ’80s, we were very disturbed about the state of the community. In 1988, a dozen Sikh professionals — Prof Kirpal Singh, Prof Balbir Singh, Dr Surinder Singh, Dr Kanwaljit Soin and Mr Balbeer Singh Mangat — met to look into these problems.’

The Singapore Sikh Education Foundation was born on 3 December 1990. ‘And our aim was to focus on our education standards and check drug abuse. Towards this end, we set up a panel. The panel worked with the Singapore Welfare Board to advise the government on Sikh affairs.’

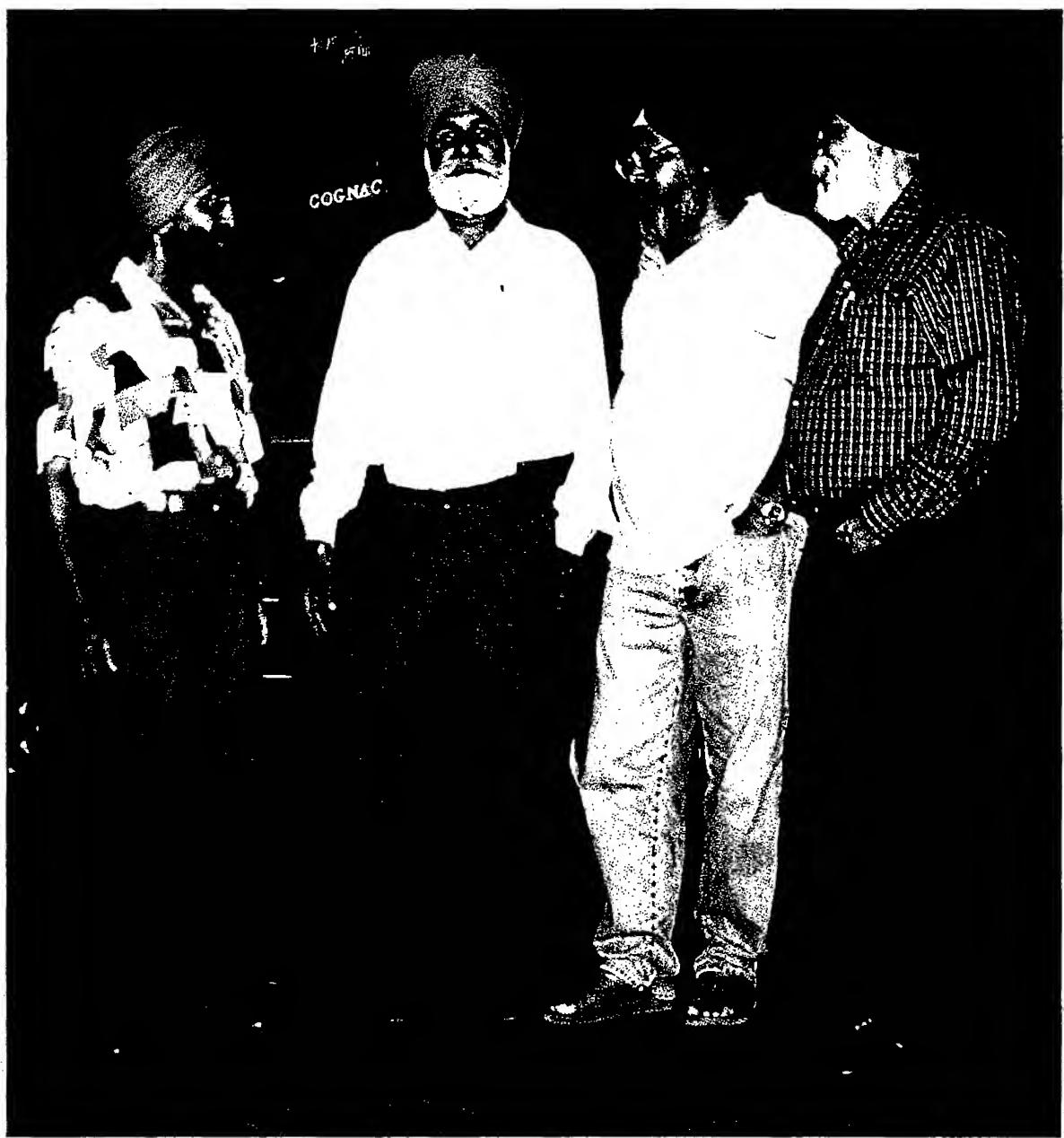
Bhajan Singh presented his study titled *One Generation of Sikh Boys and Girls* to this panel. ‘From my study, I had developed a social, educational, value and health profile of the Sikh youth,’ Bhajan Singh says.

The findings shocked the Sikhs. The community leaders sat up and took notice. They sought help from top leaders to address the problems facing the community. ‘We held a farewell party for Lee Kuan Yew and a welcome party for the new Prime Minister. We invited scholars from twenty countries to debate Sikh issues and introduced the concept of Sikh heritage dinners to discuss our glorious past. Excellence awards were introduced for brilliant Sikh students.’

These days, the Singapore Sikh Education Foundation coordinates these activities.

The Foundation takes children on heritage tours to India and Pakistan. ‘Learning Punjabi is not enough. Children should also know about their heritage. So, we have launched the Sikh Heritage Inculcation Programme. Towards this end, we have developed two CDs (*Rishte-Nate* and *Nursery Rhymes on the Sikh Gurus*), published dozens of books and composed a national song titled *Nau Niyam* (nine principles). Every Saturday and Sunday Sikh students begin their Punjabi classes with this song. We tell them that the Punjabi language is their birthright and that they should practise *chad di kala* (optimism). In management studies, they first claimed that people succeed because of their high intelligent quotient (IQ). Then they claimed people succeed because of their high EQ (emotional quotient). Now they say that people succeed because of their high AQ (adversity quotient). And the Sikhs have known only odds in their history,’ says Bhajan Singh.

Speaking of the Singapore Civil Service, Param Ajeet Singh Bal was one of the first Sikhs to be recruited directly to this elite service in the ’60s.



Former bureaucrat Param Ajeet Singh Bal (left) with Surjan Singh (right) and journalist Gurdip Singh (in blue turban).

A consultant with the Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Bal says, 'Earlier, the highest Sikh officers in the Singapore civil service (outside the judiciary) included some doctors, police officers and teachers. By 1947, there were four Sikh doctors in the civil service. In the '50s, some Sikhs became teachers and principals. In 1963, two Sikhs directly joined the new Singapore Administrative Service.'

Bal himself was one of them. Balbir Singh, the other entrant, went on to serve in the ministry of land affairs.

Young Bal had just returned from Australia after completing his MA (Hons) in 1963 under the Commonwealth scholarship when he was picked up for the elite service.

'My first posting was in the economic planning unit of the Prime Minister's Office. Dr C.R. Krishnamurthy of the Indian Planning Commission was my first boss. After serving in the budget division and the ministry of environment, I moved to the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation where I retired as its senior vice-president.'

In the 1969 National Day Honours, he was conferred the Public Administration Medal by the government. On his retirement, Bal served as director of the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre before moving to the Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Bal and his wife, Naresh, have three daughters.

If Bal retired from the highest position in the civil service, Jagjit Singh rose to the number two spot in the City Police before his retirement in 2001.

Jagjit Singh, whose father had served as a subedar in the Indian Army, joined the City Police in 1967. 'I loved the uniform, applied for a post and got selected. I served in all capacities — in uniform, as a plainclothes man, as director of CID and as deputy commissioner of operations,' he says.

What does his rise to the top symbolize for the Sikh community?

'You can accomplish anything in Singapore if you are keen,' he says.

The high point of his career, he says, was 'the hijacking of Singapore Airlines' flight SQ-117 by four Pakistanis in the '90s. I was in charge of the whole police operation. When the talks broke down and the hijackers threatened to take off from Changi Airport, my commandos stormed the plane, killing the hijackers.'

Hard work and honesty are the hallmarks of the Sikhs and they have a bright future in the inland nation, says the soft-spoken cop.

The tough-talking Dr Kanwaljit Soin is a very familiar Sikh woman in Singapore. 'Because she has many firsts to her credit,' says Param Ajeet Singh Bal.

Soin was the first woman orthopaedic in Singapore. And she became the first nominated woman Member of Parliament in 1992.

Married to former Supreme Court judicial commissioner, Amarjeet Singh, Soin is bold, blunt and knowledgeable. A fierce activist for women's rights, she has ruffled many feathers. 'And calmed many ruffled feathers,' she laughs.



(Top): Jagjit Singh rose to the second highest position in the Singapore Police.

(Above): Bal with his family.

Despite women's immense contribution, she says, Singapore remains a male-dominated society. 'Women fought for the country's independence alongside men. They voted overwhelmingly for the People's Action Party (which has been in power since 1959). But their role has not been recognized. Between 1970 and 1984, there was no woman in parliament. The Singaporeans were eager to listen to alternative voices in parliament. That's why the Nominated Members of Parliament Scheme was introduced.'

Soin was the first woman, along with five men, to be nominated in 1992. She was re-nominated in 1994.

Why was she selected for this honour?

'Five to ten people, who are on the voters' list, propose, second and endorse you. You should be someone who has made significant contribution in some field or profession or community service. I had a track record of service.'

Among the important issues she raised as an MP was the Family Violence Bill. 'It was the second time in Singapore's history that a private member had moved a Bill. Violence against women is a fact of life, and the Bill brought the issue to the fore. The media was very supportive. It pricked the conscience of the people. The government incorporated many provisions of the Bill into the Women's Charter,' says Soin.

Born in Gujranwala in Pakistan in 1941, Soin moved along with her family to Delhi in 1947. 'But my father, who in his younger days had been to Indonesia, did not like Delhi and we left for Indonesia. For a year, I went to the Gandhi Memorial School in Indonesia. When I was ten, my parents sent me to a boarding school in Singapore. Later, they joined me.'

Is she aware of her Sikh heritage?

'Yes, I am proud of my heritage. I took Punjabi as a subject in school. I can read and write it. But I consider myself a Singaporean first. Once you get involved in a particular community, you cannot reach out to others,' says Soin.

Her equally famous husband, Amarjeet Singh, came to Singapore from Kuala Lumpur in 1956 to study law. After graduating in 1961, he served as a magistrate for a few years before starting his own practice. In 1992, he was appointed a Judicial Commissioner to the Supreme Court. He retired in 2001.

In the field of literature, Prof Kirpal Singh is an internationally acclaimed scholar on Aldous Huxley (the topic of his Ph.D.). A poet of repute, he was also the first Asian to do a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Adelaide, Australia.

Born in Singapore, raised in Malaysia and educated in Singapore, Kirpal Singh went to Adelaide under a Colombo Plan scholarship in 1976. Once in Australia, he quickly established his reputation as a scholar and poet.

'Twenty Poems, my book of poetry, was published by the Calcutta Writers' Workshop in 1978. The same year, Michael Tolley and I edited a science fiction book titled *The Stellar Gauge: Essays on Science Fiction*,' says the Sikh scholar.



Singapore's first  
woman orthopaedic  
doctor and first  
nominated woman  
Member of Parliament  
Kanwaljit Soin.

He completed the thesis *Dichotomy and Synthesis: Aldous Huxley's Search for Integration* in 1978, establishing himself as a scholar on Huxley. He joined the International Aldous Huxley Society.

On the Society's request, he hosted the Aldous Huxley International Conference in Singapore in 2000, bringing together more than sixty scholars from twenty countries.

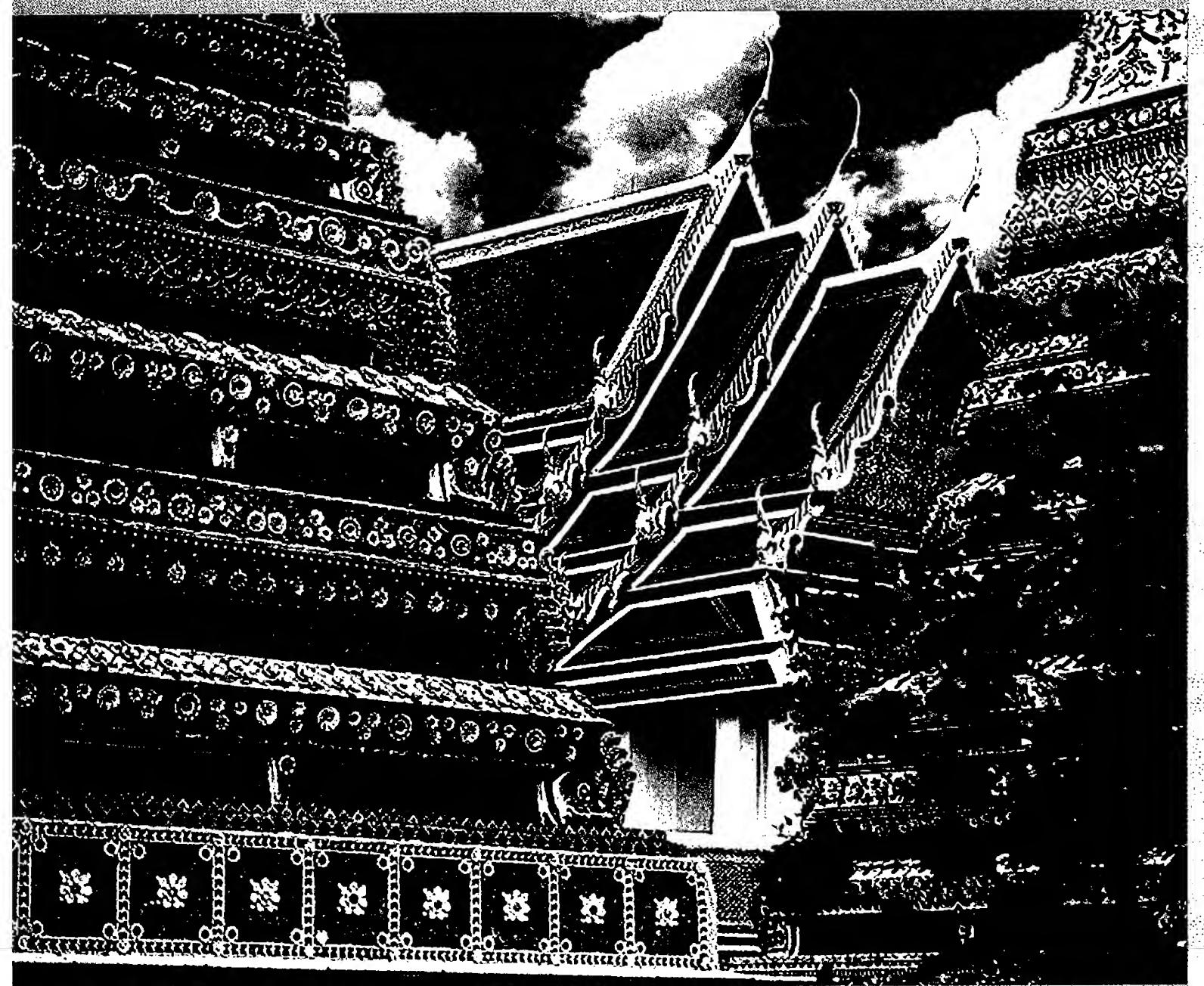
He currently teaches Creative Thinking at the Singapore Management University. Accredited with the Center for Creative Leadership and the Big Five (USA), Kirpal Singh gives keynote speeches all over the world.

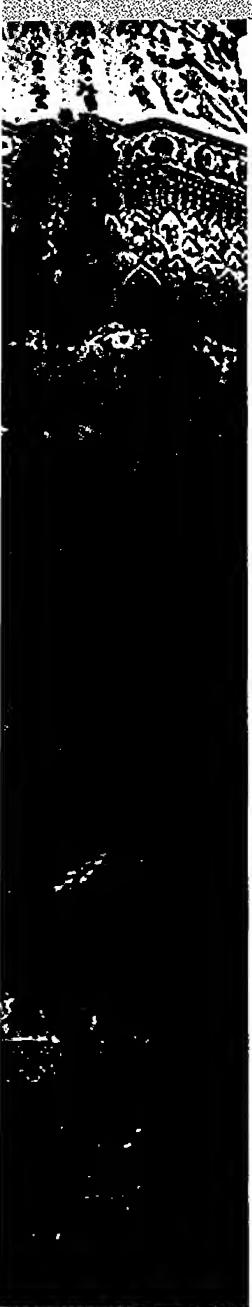
He was the Distinguished International Writer at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 1997. The same year, his poems were dramatized on Broadway. Honoured by many universities around the world, Kirpal Singh is working on a book entitled *Thinking Hats and Coloured Turbans: The Teaching of Creativity Across Cultures*. Inter-cultural relations are his area of interest. Towards this end, he has established the Center for Cross-Cultural Studies at the Singapore Management University.

Deeply devoted to the community, Kirpal Singh has served as chairman of the Singapore Sikh Professionals. In mid-2000, he organized a seminar — *Sikhs Today: The Global Challenge* — to debate the issues facing the community.

Singapore-born audio engineer Dindae Sheena is credited with creating China's most advanced recording studio called Oasis.

'From the performance of our kids in educational institutions, I can safely say that we are set to produce new-age pioneers,' said Bal, as we drove through the causeway leading into Malaysia.





THAILAND:

ROYAL WELCOME

T

he Sikhs in Thailand come like a whiff of fresh air. White-robed and punctilious about their religious observances, they have a visibly striking presence. Travel through any road or lane in Bangkok, and you will not fail to notice them.

By 2002, there were five thousand Sikhs in Thailand — spread over Bangkok, Phuket, Pataya, Ubol, Udon and Khon Kaen. They have carved out a niche for themselves in real estate, garment trade and the hotel business.

Interestingly, 2002 marked one hundred years of Sikh presence in Thailand. To mark the occasion, the Thai government donated a plot of prime land to the community to raise a memorial. Sikhs have mingled well into the local Thai society and yet retained their identity.

Few know that Thai Sikhs had played a special role in India's freedom struggle by committing their life and assets to the Indian National Army.

Fast forward the hundred-year-old history of the Thai Sikh community and you have the Thakrals, Chawlas, Narulas, Sethis, Narangs and Sachdevas.

A few Sikhs have ventured into professional streams, including Justice Santi Thakral and former National Energy Authority deputy director-general Mohar Singh Monga.

In fact, the Kartar Singh Thakral empire of Singapore and Australia had its beginnings in Bangkok where Kartar Singh's father, Sohan Singh, came as a boy from Punjab and started 'Punjab Stores' in 1905.

Unlike their Singapore and Malaysia brethren who were brought in as soldiers and guards, the Sikhs came to Thailand to do business. And almost all of them came from the trading classes of the Gujranwala area of Pakistan.

Oral history says that Ladha Singh was the first Sikh to come to Thailand in 1890. 'He was my mother's brother and came with one Kirpa Ram,' says Seth Trilok Singh Chawla of Bangkok.

'Because economic conditions in Punjab were not good, people were already moving out as soldiers, guards and railway construction workers to Singapore, Malaya and East Africa. It was easy to come to Thailand, as there was no turmoil here. Singapore and Malaya were badly affected in those days,' he says.

Interestingly, all Sikhs in Thailand were called Seths.

Why?

'The merchants from Bombay, who had come to Thailand before the Sikhs, used to address one another as Sethji. So, we too started addressing rich Sikhs as Seths,' explains Chawla. Tracing the history of the community in Thailand, he says, 'My maternal uncle, Ladha Singh, was the first Sikh to come in 1890. Later, he brought his younger brothers — Bishan Singh, Gurmukh Singh and Mahal Singh. They set up their first shop in Bangkok under the name of L.S. Bhagwan Singh & Co. My father, Phoola Singh, came in 1902.'

Among the other Sikhs who arrived at that time and later made it big were Phoola Singh, Labh Singh, Nidhan Singh, Budha Singh and Sardar Singh Narang, Balwant Singh and Arjun Singh.

The inflow picked up in 1927-28 when many Sikhs brought in their relatives from Punjab. In 1934, constitutional rule was introduced in Thailand, giving people a lot of freedom. As a result, many Sikhs reached Thailand. 'The aim of the first Sikhs was to make some money and go back to Punjab. But nobody went back, particularly after the War,' says Seth Trilok Singh.

A large number of Sikhs came in the wake of the Partition of India in 1947.

Considered the granddad of the Thai Sikh community, Seth Trilok Singh was born in Bangkok in 1921. 'I went to India in 1927 and returned in 1934. There were just eighty to ninety Sikh families here in those days.'

His family firm, G.S. Phoola Singh, was one of the first Sikh enterprises to do well before the Second World War. 'My brother, Gurbux Singh, and I ran the firm. We made a lot of money by building properties and houses. My three brothers — Suhel, Narain Singh and Awtar — too joined us from India,' he says.

Seth Trilok Singh went on to acquire a branch of the Bank of Ayodhya in Bangkok. In the '60s, the five Chawla brothers split up.

He went into real estate, financing and exports. 'Today, my seven sons look after my businesses in Thailand, India and the US,' he says.

Seth Trilok Singh is the first Indian to be decorated by the King of Thailand with the prestigious White Elephant Award, the Golden Crown Medal and the Thai Red Cross Medal.



(Above): Namdhari Sikhs are a familiar sight in Thailand.

(Right): Businessman Trilok Singh Chawla, whose forefathers were the first to come to Thailand in the 1890s, with his son Santokh Chawla and daughter-in-law at his Bangkok residence.

Another Chawla who has made it big is Sura Chansrichawla. His grandfather Phoola Singh started off with textiles and later ventured into real estate. His father, Gurbux singh, was a shareholder in the Bank of Ayodhya. Taking over in the 70s, Sura went on to acquire many properties, including the Holiday Inn and a golf course.

His Siam Vidhya Group is also well known for its philanthropic work.

Sura has invested in many projects in India.

The late Sardar Singh Narang of Thai Penang Fabrics was another pioneering Sikh in Thailand.

Sardar Singh, who died in 1998, came to Thailand as a nine-year-old boy in 1915.

As Narotam Singh Narang recalls, 'My father lost his whole family in an epidemic. One of our relatives helped him. Then a Sikh from Thailand brought him to Bangkok. After three years, when my father asked that man to give him the money he promised for his return trip, that man refused. As he could not go back to India, my father opened a shop in partnership. But his partner turned out to be a gambler, landing my father in debt. However, he paid back the debt within six months. Creditors were pleased and they put up money for my dad's new business.'

Sardar Singh opened a new shop that soon became famous because of his honesty and integrity. Narotam Singh narrates, 'Once my father forgot to give back some amount to a woman customer. He ran in search of her, gave back thirty satangs and apologized.'

His business flourished.

Sardar Singh named his shop Penang Store that was later changed to Thai Penang Fabrics because of splits in the family.

Everybody addressed Sardar Singh as Mr President because he headed the local Singh Sabha Gurdwara. Under Narotam Singh Narang, Thai Penang Fabrics has now become a famous name in textiles in Bangkok. 'We have two factories, and we get our merchandise from Eastern Europe, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and India. We are into woven and non-woven fabrics, fusible and non-fusible interlinings. There is no exaggeration if I say that we are the first name in fabric interlining.'

Thanks to his efforts as president of the Young Thai Sikh Association, the image of the community has improved greatly over the years.

As he says, 'Since the 1980s, the Association has promoted understanding with the Thais. Our members helped people in crisis. The Thai people started appreciating our work. This helped us improve our image. Today, we are a respected group in Thailand. We donate blood and organize marathons to raise funds. The Thai Princess visited the gurdwara during the tercentenary celebrations.'

For his services, Narotam Singh was awarded a Gold Medal by the Thai King. 'Only three or four persons have received this award,' he says.

What's the secret of his success?



(Clockwise from top)

Narotam Singh Narang with his family at his posh residence in Bangkok

Narang being honoured at the royal palace

Surachansri Chawla is one of the richest Sikhs in Thailand

Gurcharan Singh Khurana in front of his Metro Palace Hotel in the heart of Bangkok

'Close family ties. *Muthi khul gayee, bhaiid khul gaya.*'

Narang's neighbour, Gurcharan Singh Khurana, was a late comer to Thailand, but he too has made it big. Starting from scratch in the '60s, Khurana is a multi-millionaire today.

'In the beginning, I had a tough time. I used to walk twenty miles a day to sell cloth, earning twenty to thirty bucks a day,' he reminisces.

Within three to four years, he saved enough to buy properties back in India. On his return to Thailand in 1972, he entered garment exports. 'I imported fabric from India, Korea and Japan and did my manufacturing here.'

In 1979, he hit the big time when he went into manufacturing on a large scale and began exporting to the US, Europe and the Middle East. 'Between 1979 and 1984, our Eastonfab Corporation was the leading exporter in Bangkok,' he says.

In the '80s, he got into the hospitality business. 'First we built a small guest house, then bought the Metro Palace which is bang in the heart of the city,' says his son Harjit Khurana.

The Thai people and the royal family, says Khurana, respect the Sikhs so much that when Giani Arjun Singh, the granthi of the Singh Sabha Gurdwara, died in 1995 the royal palace sent the flame to light the pyre.

Much earlier, the late Arjan Singh Khanijou set up the famous KhonkenImpex and Khonken Stores, becoming one of the richest Sikhs in Bangkok. His three sons are into real estate, finance and the hospitality business.

Rajinderpal Singh Thakralbutra, who is related to Kartar Singh Thakral of Singapore, is a big name in textiles in Bangkok.

The Sachdeva brothers (Harbans Singh and Ramindar Singh), Gian Singh Amarnath and Darshan Singh Bajaj are well-known realtors.

Bachitar Singh Narula and Kirpal Singh Narula own the Sheraton Hotel in Bangkok.

History will record the role played by Thai Sikhs and the Thais in India's freedom struggle. It is a known fact that the Thai government had welcomed Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose with open arms.

Seth Trilok Singh Chawla, who was a close associate of Netaji, says, 'Had Netaji lived longer, India would not have been partitioned. Jinnah had full faith in him.'

Bose was the first-ever Indian revolutionary to be weighed in gold on his birthday in 1943 in Bangkok. 'He weighed a solid eighty-three kilos. All of us had pledged him our blood, sweat and money in writing. What a man!' says a misty-eyed Trilok Singh, showing the old receipts pledging money to the INA.

Digging out two pistols Netaji had handed over to him before leaving Bangkok for the last time, Trilok Singh says, 'His parting words were: "See you at the Red Fort". Eight days later, he was reported dead.'



(Above): Netaji's close associate, Seth Trilok Singh Chawla, shows the two pistols Netaji left with him when he left Bangkok for the last time.

(Right): Chawla being honoured by the Thai King.

(Below): A gathering at Bangkok's Singh Sabha gurdwara.



Displaying the pistols — a Colt .32 and FN .635 — Chawla says, ‘Netaji usually carried only one pistol. But when he retreated from Rangoon to Bangkok with the Rani Jhansi Brigade, he had two pistols on him.’

Netaji’s contribution, he says, has not been properly appreciated in India. ‘His role has been deliberately underplayed. But he was always dignified and graceful. He was forced to leave the Congress, but he never uttered a word against Gandhiji or Nehru. He never bowed to anyone. He declined the German offer to accommodate him and his men into the German Army. Instead, he asked the Germans to let him form the Indian National Army (INA) — it was first set up in Berlin — with 10,000-12,000 prisoners of war (PoWs) released by the Germans. On the persuasion of the Japanese, he moved from Berlin to the Far East to boost the struggling Indian Independence League under Rash Behari Bose. Netaji too wanted to be near the theatre of action (against the British). After a two-month journey from Germany, he reached Singapore and relaunched the INA with fifty thousand PoWs released by the Japanese. At its peak, the INA had eighty thousand members.’

Seth Trilok Singh proudly shows the receipts confirming that Indian traders in Bangkok met all the expenses of the INA.

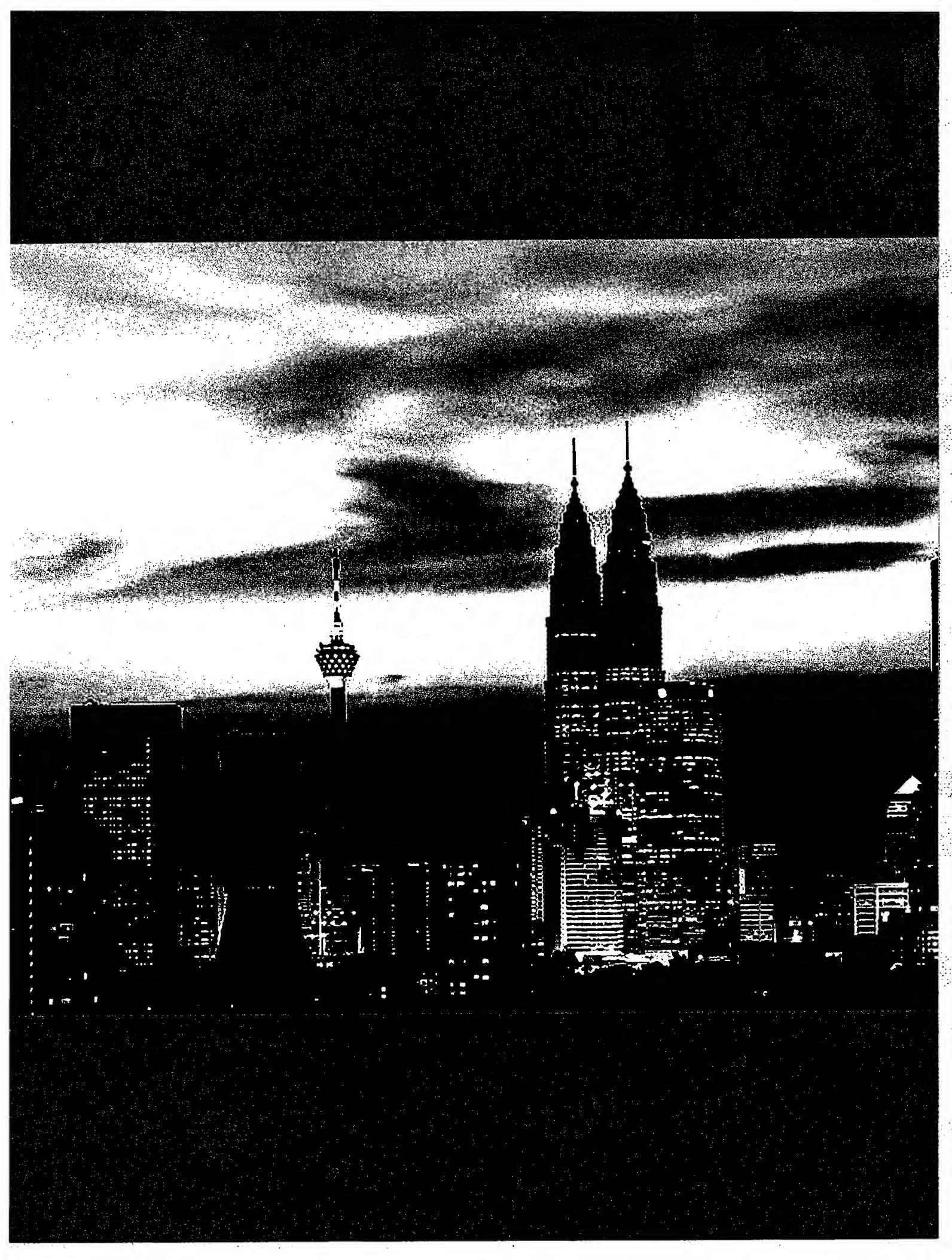
‘The Thai people were also very generous to Netaji. Twice, the Thai government treated Netaji as their official guest.’

Recalling Netaji’s last days, he says, ‘Netaji felt let down by the Japanese. Had they heeded his advice not to completely cordon off the Indian Army in Kohima and left a passage, many Indian soldiers would have crossed over to the INA. But the Japanese were eager to finish them (the Indian army soldiers) off. But it didn’t happen as the cordon was broken.’

Netaji retreated from Rangoon ‘fearing molestation of his Rani Jhansi Brigade by the British Indian Army.’

‘When the surrender loomed, the INA had 80 lakh bahts (Thai currency) in its account. All soldiers were given six months’ salary as we didn’t want the money to fall into the hands of the enemy (the British).’

Chawla and INA leaders had met Nehru to request him to accommodate INA soldiers into the Indian Army. ‘But it did not happen.’





MALAYSIA:

SOARING HIGH



rossing the Second Link from Singapore into Malaysia, you reach the city of Johor Bahru. In the first decade of the last century, this city was home to many Sikh dairy farmers and bullock cart drivers. From here rose Ajit Singh who went on to become the first Sikh diplomat in Malaysia and the first secretary-general of ASEAN.

On the way to Kuala Lumpur, you stop at the town of Seremban to meet Datuk Mahima Singh who has the distinction of becoming the first MP in independent Malaysia's first election. Born in 1904 near Kuala Lumpur, Mahima Singh is the repository of Sikh history in Malaysia. He narrates it with anecdotes.

Propping his elbows on the table, he says, 'When I was in parliament, Lee Kuan Yew (former Prime Minister of Singapore) and Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman were having a chat. Lee told Rahman: "You know the Sikhs? I have a great regard for them as long as they wear the turban." Tunku asked: "Why?" Lee replied: "When the Sikhs lose their turban, they lose their balance of thinking. And when they lose their balance of thinking, they are no good." Referring to one Karam Singh, who was in the Opposition (Tunku's party) at that time, Lee told Tunku, "Look, if he had the turban, he could be a great asset to you. Now that he has no turban, he is a liability for you. I have the same problem in Singapore. My Labor leader, who is a Sikh, does not wear the turban. He is a big nuisance to me. I wish he had the turban".'

The turban, says Mahima Singh, was a handicap before the Second World War.

'But the valour of the Sikh soldiers in the War made the turban respectable. The Kuala Lumpur War Memorial is full of Singhs.'

As in Singapore, Sikhs were first brought to Malaysia (Malaya then) by the British as soldiers and policemen towards the middle of the nineteenth century.

In 2002, there were more than eighty thousand Sikhs in this nation of 20 million. Popularly known as bhai, the Sikh features regularly in cartoonist Lat's works in Malaysia..

'Many have been decorated with the country's civilian titles of Datuk and Tan Sri,' says Harbinder Singh of the Sikh Naujawan Sabha of Malaysia.

The Malaysian Sikhs have many firsts to their credit. Jawar Singh Dhillon was the first Sikh to become a barrister in 1940.

As mentioned, Datuk Mahima Singh was the first MP to be elected to parliament. Karpal Singh is the country's topmost lawyer and deputy leader of the Democratic Action Party. And he was also the first MP to be ejected from parliament for 'attacking' the king.

Sarwan Singh Gill made history when he became the first Sikh chief justice of Malaysia in 1974. As his daughter Nirmala Gill says, he came to Malaya at the age of fourteen from Parao Mehna in Firozepur district in 1928. After a teaching assignment in Singapore, he became a court interpreter in Kuala Lumpur in 1934. During the Japanese occupation, he went to Singapore to study law and was posted at Ipoh as a magistrate. At the end of the War, he went to London to study higher law. On his return, he was appointed senior assistant registrar. In 1957, he became the first Malayan to be appointed as the registrar of the Supreme Court. In 1962, he was elevated to the High Court bench at Kuala Lumpur, becoming the first Sikh judge in the country. He became a federal court judge in 1969 and the chief justice of Malaya in 1974. Gill retired in 1979.

'In recognition of his services, Gill was twice given the title of Tan Sri. It is the second highest award. He passed away in 1998,' says Harbinder Singh of the Sikh Naujawan Sabha Malaysia.

Another Gill — Datuk Pajan Singh Gill — is currently a High Court judge in Kuala Lumpur.

Yet another Gill — Gurdial Singh — brought the sports multinational — Adidas — to Malaysia.

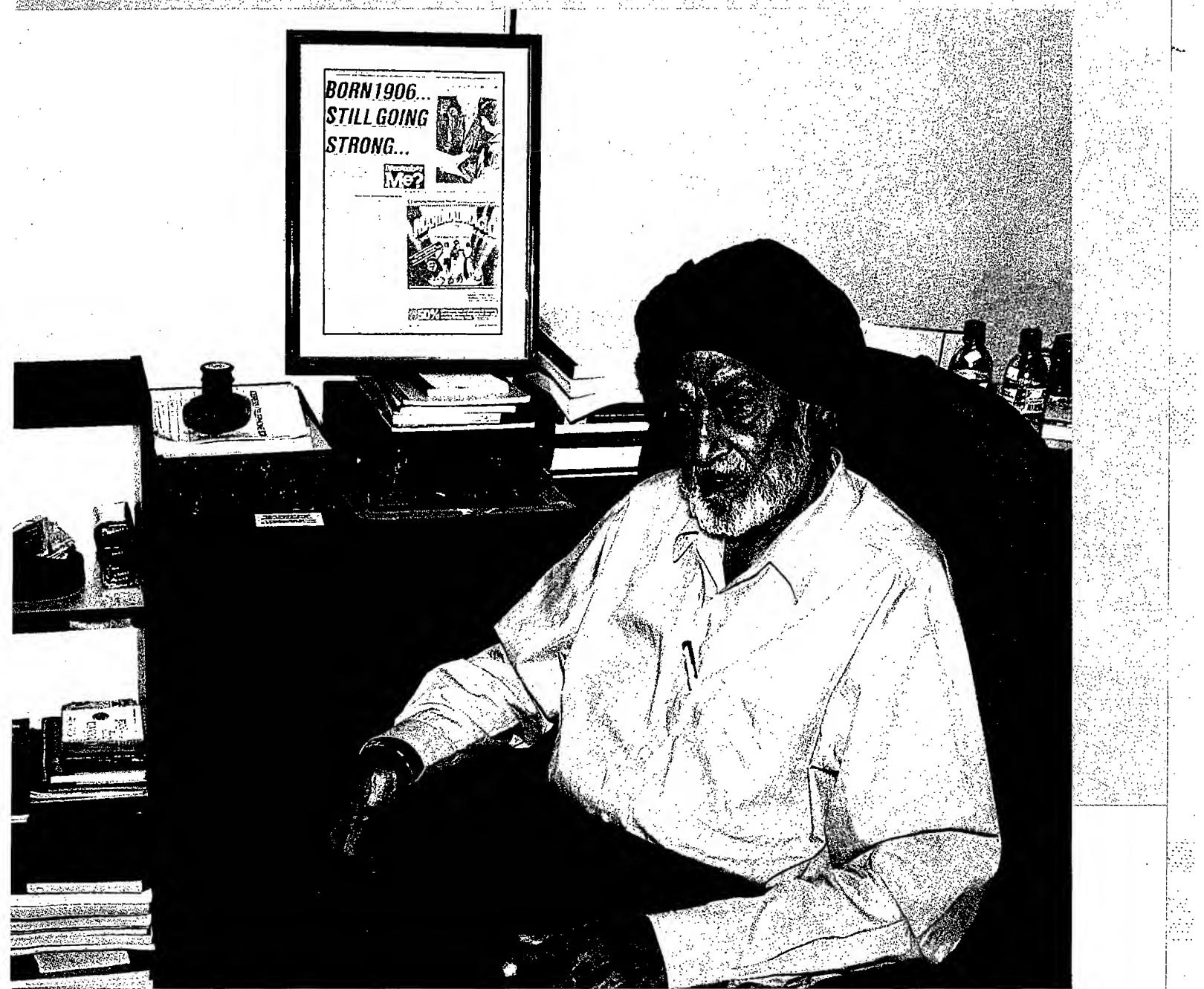
Parmjit Singh is the pioneer of information technology education in the country.

Jagjeet Singh is Malaysia's foremost woman educationist. Dr Hardeep Singh and Dr Kashmahinder Singh are famous doctors in Kuala Lumpur.

Master Gurnam Singh is one of Malaysia's foremost teachers and the brain behind the teachers' movement in the Asia-Pacific region.

Harjeet Hullan is the most prominent Sikh face on Malaysian television. Sarban Singh, Randhir Singh, Balbir Singh, Sukhwinder Kaur, Hardev Kaur and Harbhajan Singh all are journalists with English and Malay papers.

Darshan Singh is known for promoting cycling in Malaysia.



Mahima Singh was the first Sikh MP in independent Malaysia's first election.

Harbinder Singh is the force behind the Sikh Naujawan Sabha that is working for the Sikh youth in the region.

In this predominantly Muslim country, Sikhs live in harmony with the majority community in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh, Seremban, Malacca and the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.

Across Malaysia, there are more than a hundred gurdwaras, some being more than a hundred years old.

Punjabi is taught in gurdwaras and the exclusive Tat Khalsa Punjabi School in Kuala Lumpur. At the end of 2001, a private primary and secondary school — Sri Dasmesh Academy — was started by Sukhdev Singh, former president of the Sikh Naujawan Sabha, and his brother Harvinder Singh. ‘It is the only full-fledged Sikh school in Malaysia now. Sukhdev Singh is a pilot with Malaysian Airlines and leader of the internationally acclaimed Sri Dasmesh Pipes & Drums Band and Harvinder Singh is an engineer,’ says Harbinder Singh.

*Malaya Samachar* is the only surviving Punjabi paper in the country and in the whole of South East Asia. Started in 1936 under the name of *Pardesi Khalsa Sewak*, it was renamed *Malaya Samachar* in 1965.

Let us first take a look at the history of Malaysian Sikhs through the eyes of Datuk Mahima Singh who not only served as an MP for two terms, but was also the founder-member of the Malaysian Indian Congress (a coalition partner in the government today).

Mahima Singh, whose father came to Malaysia as a soldier from Punjab, recalls, ‘Life was tough in those days as ninety-five per cent of the Sikhs had no education. They served as security guards and policemen. Many plied bullock-carts. But they were wise enough to know the value of education. As a result, the first Sikh generation born here got a good education.’

Indeed, he was the first Sikh to complete his senior cambridge from Port Dickson and become a teacher. ‘It was as a teacher that I got interested in politics. I became good friends with Tunku Abdul Rahman who later became our prime minister,’ he says.

Mahima Singh came in touch with Pandit Nehru and Indira Gandhi when they visited Malaya in 1937. ‘Nehru had come to Rangoon on holiday after the 1936 elections in India. My friend Changappa, who ran a weekly, invited Nehru to Malaya. To please their British masters, some people sent Nehru a telegram, asking him not to come. Anyhow, Panditji came here. In the first speech here, he said, “The British Empire is like an old oak. It looks strong and majestic. But it is rotten inside. A strong push will shake it. It is up to you to decide...”. He was not arrested. We felt emboldened and planned a reception for him. Though everybody wanted to be the chairman or vice-chairman of the reception committee, nobody wanted to be its secretary as that role would have thrust one centerstage and annoyed the British. That responsibility was thrust on me. We welcomed Panditji. Next day, I went out with him. Panditji put his arm on my shoulder and said, “Young man, listen. Never cringe. Keep your dignity. Always give respect where it is due.” That was the turning point in my life. I asked him: “Panditji, why is India poor?” He replied: “India is poor, but Punjab is



Mahima Singh (standing second from left) with Pandit Nehru and Indira Gandhi during their visit to Malaya in 1937.

not. But Punjabis have a problem that has been created for them by the British." I asked: "What?" Panditji said: "Punjab is not poor, but people there suffer from two things — liquor and litigation. This is a disease planted on them by the British." After a pause, he said: "Young man, you don't know poverty unless your child is sick and you don't have money in your pocket".'

Years later, Mahima Singh met Indira Gandhi when she came to Malaysia as prime minister. 'At the state party, I went to meet her with a picture of hers which was taken during Nehru's visit here in 1937. I asked her: "Prime Minister, do you remember this picture?" She forgot everything and kept looking at the picture. She asked me: "Are you in the picture?" I said: "Yes. I am an MP now. I met her in Delhi later".'

During the Second World War, Mahima Singh joined the Indian Independence League apart from running his shops. 'During the Japanese occupation, I was sent to jail for collaborating with the enemy. The Indian National Congress sent its lawyers to defend us. But before these lawyers could land at Penang, we were released.'

'I also went to Singapore to listen to Netaji's speeches. He was very inspirational. He understood the masses and could adapt to different situations very quickly.'

When the first election took place in independent Malaysia, the Malaysian Indian Congress was offered three seats. 'The first two seats went to the president and the vice-president. And the third seat came to me. Since I was very popular in the Port Dickson area, I was elected unopposed. And I became the first MP in independent Malaya.' Mahima Singh was returned unopposed in the next election too.

Reflecting on his contribution as an MP, Mahima Singh says, 'Though I was not a good speaker, I made my mark. I became very friendly with journalists. I would mix with them and they would tell me what the public wanted. So, whenever I got a chance, I would raise issues that touched the common man. The next day, my name would be in the papers. This holds true for business as well. It is a question of what people want, not what you want to give them.'

Mahima Singh has a straightforward advice for the Sikh youth. 'Whenever I meet a young man these days, he says he wants to become famous and rich. When I ask him about his plans, he says he has none. I tell these young men to have a goal and keep working towards it. Like a lover, they should think of their beloved goal all the time.'

Singh runs two trusts in his native Handiaye village near Sangrur in Punjab to promote education. 'These trusts are in memory of my father, Karam Singh, who used to say that man is like a bird. He can fly anywhere, but at the end of the day, he returns to his nest. Punjab is my nest.'

Disunity in the Sikh community pains him no end. As he puts it, 'The Sikhs are hard working and intelligent. As individuals, they can knock anybody out. But they cannot work as a team. Look at the Chinese. They are used to working together. If they want to start a business, five Chinese would get together and do wonders. They are honest with one another. But the Sikhs lack team spirit. Maybe, it is because our ancestors were farmers. And, a farmer



Sarwan Singh Gill was the first Sikh to become Chief Justice of Malaysia in 1974.

does not have to rely on anyone. He is not trained to work in a team. I think that is the root cause of our problems.'

Penang-born Karpal Singh is not only the deputy leader of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), but also Malaysia's most famous lawyer. He created history in 1986 when he sued the Malaysian king for "misusing the police", though he lost the case.

The following lines at the door of his Jalan Pudu Lama office in Kuala Lumpur sum up the man:

*I don't choose to be a common man,*

*It is my right to be uncommon;*

*If I can, I seek opportunity, not security,*

*I don't wish to be a kept citizen, humble and dulled by having the state to look after me;*

*I want to take that calculated risk — to dream and to build, to fail and to succeed;*

*I prefer the challenges of life to the guaranteed existence, the thrill of fulfilment to the state of calm utopia;*

*I will never trade my freedom or my dignity for handouts;*

*I will never cower before any master nor bend to any threat;*

*It is my heritage to stand erect, proud and unafraid, to think and act for myself.*

Karpal Singh, whose office is cluttered with inspirational messages, says, 'These lines are a tribute to me by a young Singapore Air Force instructor whom I successfully defended.'

Overseas, Karpal Singh is known for defending foreigners facing the death sentence in Malaysia for drug possession. To this date, he has successfully defended more than a dozen foreigners facing the gallows.

Why did he choose law and politics?

Karpal Singh replies, 'The legal profession gives you the ability to say what you want to say and face the consequences. You have yourself to blame or congratulate for whatever you do. The May 1969 race riots in Kuala Lumpur drew me into politics. I thought we have to be part of the decision-making process to safeguard our interests. The multi-racial DAP was my choice.'

Born in Penang in 1940, Karpal Singh studied law in Singapore and was called to the Penang bar in 1969. The same year he cut his political teeth. In 1974, he was first elected to the Penang Assembly. He entered parliament in the early '80s.

Karpal Singh had his first brush with the government when he challenged the Internal Security Act under which a fourteen-year-old Chinese boy was sentenced to death for possessing firearms. 'I saved him from the gallows because it would have been very dangerous for the country,' he says. Then he created history in 1984 when he became the first MP to be thrown out of parliament because he had made some remarks about the Malaysian King



(Left): Malaysia's topmost lawyer and Opposition leader Karpal Singh has saved many prisoners from the gallows.

(Below): While as a member of the Penang Assembly, Karpal Singh (left) orders the then police chief, Datuk Zaman Khan, to leave the premises.  
*(Photo courtesy: The Diplomat)*



“misusing” the police. This led to his expulsion from parliament. But Karpal Singh returned to parliament in 1986 with an even bigger majority. Being an Opposition leader, he, along with over hundred other leaders, was arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA). He fought his own case and secured his release after five months. But he was re-arrested the same day and put behind bars for nineteen months. Karpal Singh considers such incidents aberrations, adding that Malaysia is a vibrant society.

‘Tan Sri Dato’ Ajit Singh is Malaysia’s first Sikh top civil servant. He also has the distinction of being the first secretary-general of ASEAN.

‘I served for five years at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta from January 1993 to December 1997,’ he says, sitting in Petronas Twin Towers, the world’s tallest building in downtown Kuala Lumpur.

Ajit Singh has an open, honest face. Leaning against the glass wall of his office, he says, ‘I was born on 25 September 1938, in Johor. Back then, we had no running water, no electricity. My father ran a bullock-cart. I studied under a kerosene lamp.’

He graduated in 1963, applied for the civil service, and was selected.

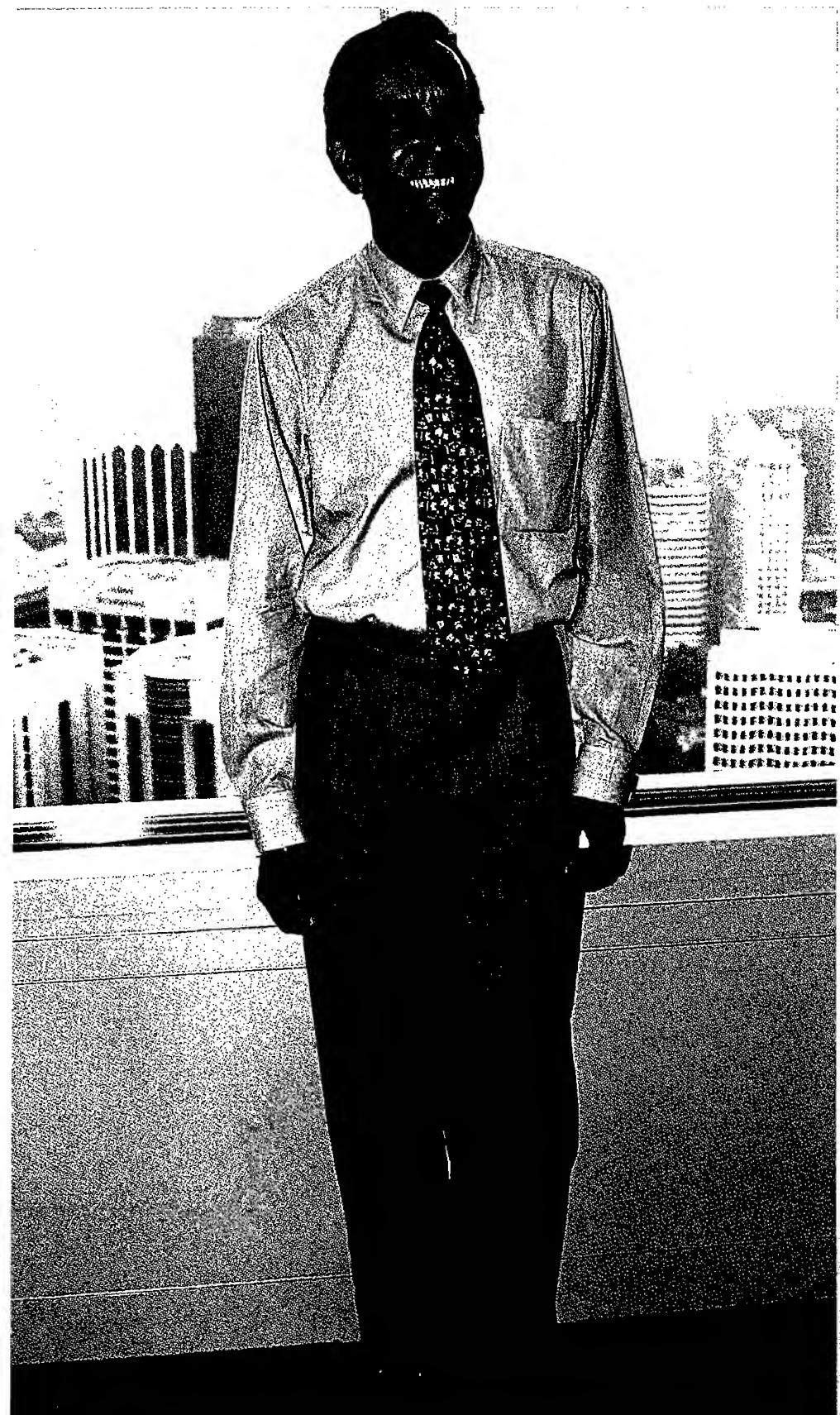
How did he feel on becoming the first Sikh diplomat in Malaysia? ‘I felt on top of the world. My parents were able to hold their head high.’

As ASEAN secretary-general, Ajit Singh visited his native India. ‘The Indian prime minister received me. The Punjab government sent a plane to Delhi to pick me up. We went to the Golden Temple, Nankana Sahib and Panja Sahib. My wife, who is a Buddhist, was with me. I am proud of my religion and culture,’ says the father of three sons.

In his thirty-year career, he served in the ministry of foreign affairs and at the country’s missions in Canberra, Addis Ababa and New York. He was Malaysia’s ambassador in Vietnam, Austria, Brazil (with concurrent accreditation to Bolivia, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela) and Germany.

‘I also represented my country at various UN bodies, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Commonwealth, APEC and ASEAN,’ he says. He was elected secretary-general of ASEAN, with the rank of a minister, for five years in January 1993. During his tenure, the ASEAN secretariat began playing a more prominent and effective role in strengthening intra-ASEAN cooperation. Of particular significance was the implementation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). It was also during his tenure that ASEAN expanded to include three new members — Vietnam (July 1995), Laos and Myanmar (July 1997).

In recognition of his services, Laos and Vietnam awarded him their prestigious Friendship Medals in December 1997. He was also awarded the Panglima Setia Mahkota award (which carries the title of “Tan Sri”) by the King of Malaysia in 1998. The Indonesian government awarded him the ‘Bintang Jasa Utama’ in February 1999 in recognition of his work in ASEAN and in helping improve Malaysia-Indonesia relations.



Malaysia's first Sikh diplomat, Ajit Singh, who went on to become the first secretary-general of the Association of South-East Asian Nations, at his office in Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur.

After the ASEAN assignment, he served the National Petroleum Oil Company, PETRONAS, as its director for international business ventures from December 1997 to October 1999.

He was elected secretary-general of the Boao Forum for Asia in February 2001. The Forum, based at Hainan in China with an office in Beijing, is a non-governmental, non-profit organization set up to promote greater interdependence and economic integration of the Asian region. He left the post for personal reasons in November 2001.

His wish: 'I want the Sikh youth to do well. I am ready to render them all help.'

Helping the Sikh youth is also the motto of businessman Gurdial Singh of Adidas (Malaysia). Gill — who was born to poor parents in Kuala Lumpur in 1924 and built his business from scratch — has made immeasurable contribution to the community through his charitable work.

He has built a twenty-bed hospital with free medical facilities. Gill is also the brain behind the largest gurdwara in the Malaysian capital. And Gill has paid back his alma mater — Methodist Boys' School — by raising a four-storeyed building at a cost of 2.5 million ringgits. 'I am grateful to my school for free education,' he says.

Gill was a seventeen-year-old student when the Japanese came to Malaysia. 'I gave up my studies as my father was very poor and bought a cow to sell milk to sustain myself,' he recalls. The Japanese dropped his brother, Amrik Singh, who joined the INA in 1943, in Calcutta for spy purposes. He was caught with Netaji's two nephews and sentenced to death in Alipore Jail. Luckily, Gandhiji prevailed upon Lord Wavell to spare their lives.

'During the War, I worked with a wireless station set up by the Japanese in Kuala Lumpur. Later, I worked for the INA in Penang, and my job involved fitting transmitters in music instruments being smuggled into India,' the elderly Gill says.

When the War ended, Gill started importing cycles from England and sports goods from India. 'In 1953, I opened my Singapore office and took over the Adidas agency. No one knew Adidas at the time. I am still the chairman of Adidas Malaysia and Godrej Malaysia. In 1967, thirty-two Indian companies came to Malaysia. Twenty-eight left and only four remained here. Godrej is one of them,' Gill says.

As he accumulated wealth, Gill started many charitable works. 'In 1949, I started the Malayan Sikh Aid Fund with seventy thousand ringgits to help needy students. Till the end of 2002, more than two hundred students had benefited from this fund. In 1965, I launched the Prem Kaur Fund in memory of my mother to finance two students every year for study abroad.'

As chairman of the Indian High Commission Trust Fund, he also helped hundreds of students with scholarships.

For his contribution to society, the Malaysian government has conferred on him the Justice of Peace and the Dato Sri awards.



(Above): G S Gill was the first to bring multinationals like Adidas to his country.

(Right): Gill is being honoured by the Malaysian King.

Parmjit Singh, the founder and head of the Asia-Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT), is a pioneer in IT.

APIIT also happens to be Asia's largest post-graduate IT centre. 'We are a one-stop centre — we have everything, from the basics to Ph.D. We offer 15 areas of expertise and five Masters. No other institute in Asia offers such a wide range — five Masters, five specializations, five Bachelors, a series of diplomas and 170 short courses,' says the tall, bearded Parmjit Singh.

APIIT offers all its Masters courses on a part-time basis to enable students to work while studying.

'At APIIT, we don't need maths for entry. We have proved that maths has nothing to do with computers. In the early 1970s when I wanted to do computing, I was rejected because I did not have a high level in maths. I went to England to do accountancy. The next year, I switched to computing. Very soon I found that maths had nothing to do with it. It was just a traditional requirement for computing. As computers evolved, the need for maths got reduced. Our method for admission is simple. We hold one-to-one interviews to assess if the student has the aptitude. IT is changing very fast, and you cannot survive in this field if you don't have the interest.'

APIIT is in huge demand in the corporate world for skill upgradation courses. 'We offer short-term courses to thousands of corporate employees every year. We build careers as our courses are industry-linked.' With thousands on its rolls, APIIT has designed its own Technology Park and a six-storeyed building. It also has Centers in Karachi, Lahore and Colombo.

Parmjit's mantra: nurture the culture of learning and skill promotion. 'You may have the best experts, but unless you create a culture of nurturing skills, it means nothing. When a person from Oxford or Cambridge says that their institutions are hundreds of years old, it means nothing. What matters is what they create.'

The first private institute to be funded by the Malaysian government, APIIT runs an excellent R & D section. Rated among the top ten educational companies in Malaysia, APIIT also enjoys the prestigious MSC (Multimedia Super Corridor) status which bestows a number of privileges on it. 'It means we enjoy certain tax incentives and other privileges, like bringing in foreigners,' beams Parmjit Singh, sitting in his cluttered office in the heart of Kuala Lumpur.

Malaysia is virtually awash with Sikh teachers.

'There are thousands of them in the country,' says Gurnam Singh, Malaysia's most famous Sikh teacher.

Gurnam Singh is also the founder-president of the National Teachers' Association, which is one of the strongest teachers' unions in South East Asia. 'I had the privilege of heading the organization for thirteen years — from 1962 to 1975,' he says, sitting in the office of the Sikh Naujawan Sabha of Malaysia.



(Above): Parmjit Singh runs Asia's largest post-graduate IT centre known as the Asia-Pacific Institute of Information Technology in Kuala Lumpur.

(Right): Master Gurnam Singh is credited with spearheading the teachers' movement in the Asia-Pacific region.



Under him, the association went on a twenty-two-day strike in the '60s, bringing the government to its knees. Thanks to that strike, Malaysian teachers are among the highest paid in the region today.

More significantly, this man has brought together teachers from about 50 countries of the Asia-Pacific region — stretching from Turkey to the Pacific region — on a single platform. 'The aim is to co-ordinate development of education and teachers' activities.'

As a young man, Gurnam Singh was active in the Indian National League. 'I was also a trainer (discipline and recruitment) with the Indian National Army. After the Second World War, I became active in the Malaysian Indian Congress which represents the Indians who constitute about eight per cent of Malaysia's population today.'

Retired in 1997, Gurnam Singh was given the title of Toko Guru (champion of teachers). He is an advisor to Education International, which has millions of members world-wide.

This teacher is one of the most widely travelled Malaysian Sikhs.

Another widely travelled Malaysian Sikh teacher is Mrs Jagjeet Singh. Like Gurnam Singh, she too is intensely devoted to the cause of the Sikh community and education. Known as Mrs J, she is a well-known English teacher and columnist. Her column 'Dear Mrs Jagjeet' ran in the *Sunday Mail* for six years and answered queries on education, careers and related issues.

An expert in the English language, Mrs J is also a national-level examiner. As an international debating adjudicator, she has travelled all over the world.

Mrs J developed an interest in debating during her college days. 'When I joined the teaching profession, I was picked up to lead the debates at the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur. From there I went to international meets.'

But public speaking is still a hobby for her. Her main job, she says, is that of a motivational teacher. 'Students come to me for consultation. I run motivation programmes for them,' says Mrs J, who is often featured in newspapers. Mrs J has co-authored fourteen books on the English language and interview tips. For her contribution, the Malaysian government in 1998 felicitated her on Mother's Day.

At Sikh education camps, Mrs J has brought to the notice of the community the problems it will face in the future. 'I am proud of my values and tell Sikh parents to foster these values in their kids. They will never go astray. But parents are not playing their role properly. Unlike Christian institutes, gurdwaras have failed in their role. Sikh kids don't follow what is happening in gurdwaras, as they don't know the Punjabi language. There are no instructions available in English either.'

'Children are confused. They are going out of the Sikh fold. Punjabi men are not good role models.'

The community, she says, should get its act together before it is too late.



Harbinder Singh of the Malaysian Sikh Naujawan Sabha is doing his bit to promote Sikh values among the youth in the region.

The Sikh Naujawan Sabha of Malaysia is doing its bit towards this end. Says former Sabha president Harbinder Singh, ‘It is true that many people have drifted away from the Sikh faith. It is also true that there have been conversions from Sikhism to other religions. But this is due to a lack of knowledge about our heritage. We are hopeful of reversing this trend.’

Founded in the early ’60s, the Naujawan Sabha is at the forefront of religious activities, organizing youth camps and bringing out publications to promote Sikh values. The Sabha is also actively involved in welfare work. ‘In the ’80s, we took to promoting the Punjabi language. In the ’90s, we undertook career and skill development and family development programmes. Now we hold international meets to commemorate important events in Sikh history.’

The Sabha regularly conducts a dialogue with parents and community leaders.

‘The Sikh youth suffer from low self-esteem because they feel rootless. This is creating tensions in their minds, making them vulnerable to outside influences,’ says Harbinder Singh. Every year, the Sabha holds over twenty weekend camps followed by four regional and one annual national camp.

Annual fellowship camps are the Sabha’s novel way of bringing Sikh boys and girls together so that they can know one another and, maybe, find life partners.

On the lines of the Scout Movement, the Naujawan Sabha has pioneered the concept of *Akaal Purkh Ki Fauj* for Sikhs of all ages. It has three wings: the *Mighty Khalsa Brigade* for young children, the *Miri Piri Brigade* for teenagers, and the *Sant Sepahi* for the elders.

The Sabha is networking with Sikh organizations worldwide to foster solidarity.

Harjeet Singh Hullan, who is a known Sikh face on Malaysian television, says, ‘The rot lies within the community. We are not training our children properly. They are not being taught Punjabi which is the vehicle for promoting Sikhism.’

Astrologer Yaschpaule Singh too is concerned about Sikhs converting to other faiths. ‘Conversions from Sikhism are taking place as the Malaysian education system lays stress only on English and Malay. Sikh children don’t know Punjabi. As a result, they cannot understand the Gurbani. When they go to gurdwaras, they don’t follow a thing. They are vulnerable and can be easily influenced. The Sikhs are a soft target. There is another category of people who convert to other faiths. These people suffer losses in personal life, profession and business and become emotionally vulnerable. This leads to a lack of proper judgment. Many people have converted when they were in this state of mind. The Naujawan Sabha should distribute books in English on Sikhism. In gurdwaras, Sikhism should be explained in simple English. That’s the only way out.’

Astrology, he says, is not superstition but science. ‘When Guru Nanak was born, Pandit Hardev, by just looking at his face, had predicted that this child will become a great saint. The same prediction was made about the Buddha,’ he argues.

Why then did the Sikh gurus oppose astrology?



(Above): Yaschpaule Singh says astrology is about scientific calculations, not superstitions.

(Left): Malaysia's foremost Sikh woman educationist, Mrs Jagjeet Singh, with her husband.

'As I have said, astrology is a science. It is all about planetary positions. So long as a particular configuration continues, no prayers are answered, even if you change your religion. Once planets change positions, all prayers are answered. That is the issue I fight with those who leave the Sikh faith.'

'I think the Sikh gurus were aware of the dogmas prevalent at that time. India was steeped in superstition. Quacks were rampant. The gurus didn't want Sikhs to become victims of dogmas. Pure astrology has nothing to do with dogma,' says the Penang-born astrologer who operates from the Hilton Hotel in Kuala Lumpur.

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Dilli. In the first decade of the twentieth century, some Sikhs in Penang were curious to see Dilli in Indonesia.

They went, saw and never returned.

That's how Sikh influx into Indonesia began. In 1907, there were four Sikh families in Indonesia. Later, these people called their relatives and their numbers increased. In 1917, the Sikhs built their first gurdwara near Jakarta port, with contributions from Sikh families. Jakarta's second gurdwara came up in 1957.

'It was built with contributions from Sikhs and Sindhis. Today, ninety per cent of all donations to the gurdwara come from the big Sindhi community in Indonesia. We hold all our religious, social and cultural functions there,' says Pritam Singh, president of the gurdwara since 1957.

A large number of Sikhs reached Sumatra and other places in Indonesia after the Partition of India in 1947.

Today, there are over ten thousand Sikhs scattered across Indonesia, with Sumatra accounting for about eight thousand.

Many of them have moved to Jakarta in recent times as job and business avenues open in the capital.

Though there are not many high-ranking Sikhs in Indonesia, the majority are well educated. They run small and medium businesses. Sikhs have little presence in services.

Pritam Singh, who was born in 1917, is the voice of the Sikhs in Indonesia. 'Though we have not had the profile that Sikhs enjoy in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, we have played an active role in Indonesian affairs. When the INA was active, the Sikhs of Indonesia participated in its activities,' says Pritam Singh, who is the secretary-general of the Indian Association of Jakarta which advises the Indonesian government on community affairs.

Again, it was Pritam Singh who started the Indian Independence League in Indonesia in the '40s.



A long-time resident of Jakarta, businessman Pritam Singh played an important role in the INA and later in promoting India-Indonesia relations.

'I was on my way back to Indonesia after getting married in India when I met General Mohan Singh (later of the INA) at a gurdwara in Penang. He asked me to help the Japanese by raising the Indian Independence League unit in Indonesia. On reaching Indonesia, I started working for the League. I also met Netaji three or four times. I was invited to Singapore when he set up the Indian National Army and the Azad Hind Government. Then he came to Indonesia in 1944 and gave me a beautiful letter which I didn't show anyone.'

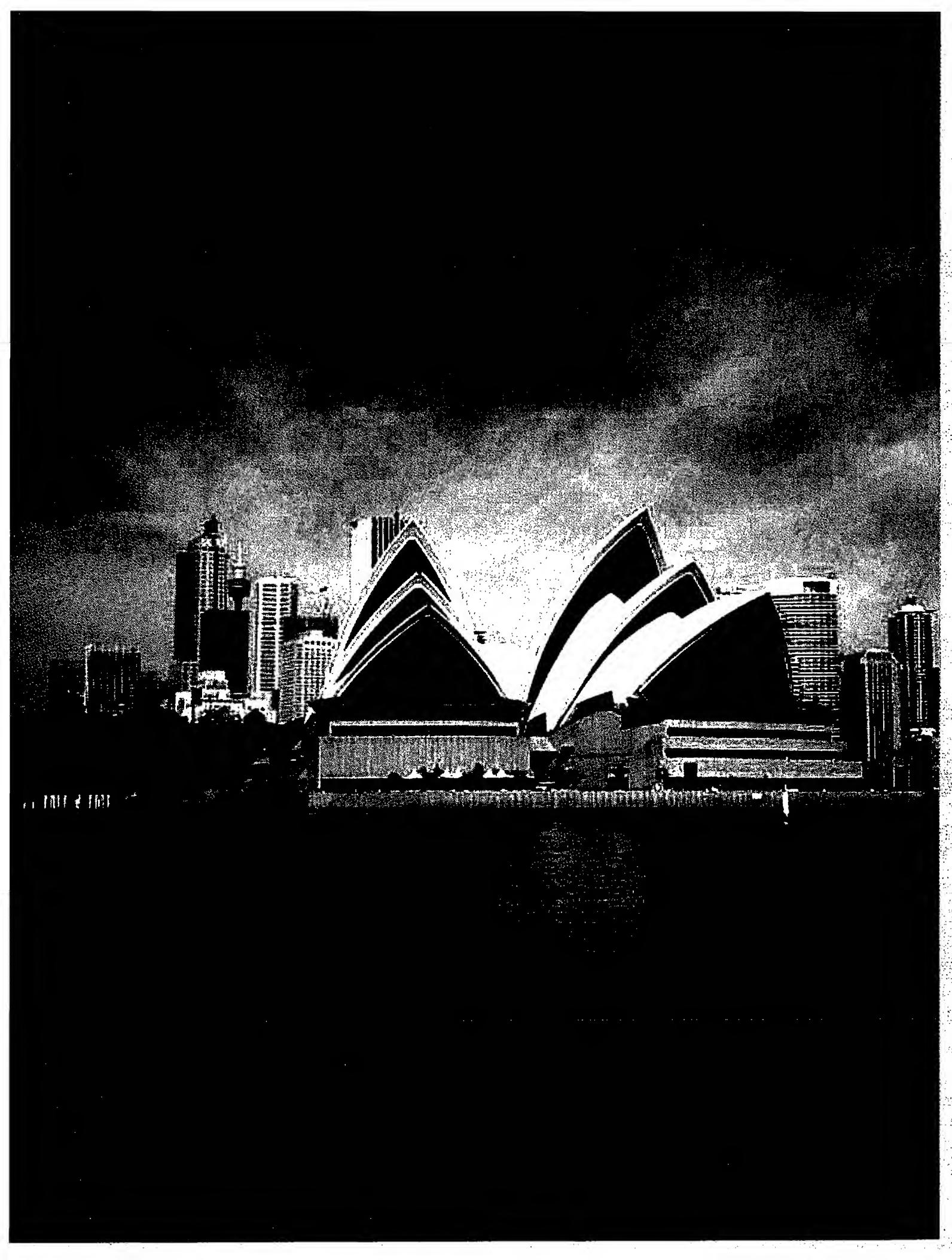
In that letter, Netaji wrote: 'Dear Pritam Singh, I am very happy to know that you are doing good work for the INA. I want you to give more time to it. Thank you very much.'

The day the Japanese fell and Netaji died, he says, 'Gen. Mohan Singh, his secretary Rattan Singh and a Gurkha aide were in my Jakarta house. Gen Mohan Singh said, "I am here. I want independence. Call some Indonesians and I can give them advice". He stayed with me for fifteen days. Then he wanted to leave, as he did not want to be identified and arrested. I took him to the gurdwara where the *granthi* identified him and asked me: "Is he Gen. Mohan Singh"? I said "no" because there was so much danger to his life. Since so many Indians were eager to see him, he offered to stay in a hotel. He stayed in the hotel for three days after which he was taken to Singapore.'

The Indonesian government roped Pritam Singh in when it sought a loan of ten million dollars from India in 1964. 'I was sent to India by the General (Indonesia was under military rule at that time) to contact Indian leaders. I met trade minister Manubhai Shah and Sardar Swaran Singh in this regard,' he says.

Are Sikhs still immigrating to Indonesia?

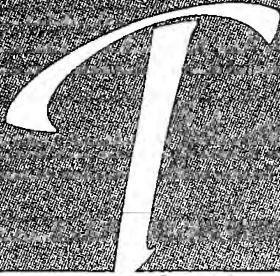
'Yes, they are still coming to Indonesia, and the Indonesians are happy to see them come,' Pritam Singh says.





# AUSTRALIA:

## GOING UP DOWN UNDER



The Who's Who of Sikhs in Australia and New Zealand is expanding fast since the '70s when the two countries liberalised their immigration policy.

At the top of the list is the humble Singapore-based Kartar Singh Thakral who owns five-star hotels and resorts from Sydney to Cairns up in Far North Queensland. Queensland's Gian Singh Bains is probably the biggest cane farmer in Australia.

In the 1950s, Brisbane-based Sikh wrestler, Bakhtawer Singh Samrai, was the Australian champion in the super heavyweight category.

Dunedin-based Sukhi Turner nee Gill created history in 1995 when she became the first Indian to win a mayor's post Down Under.

Few remember that it was a group of Australia-trained farm scientists, including Dr Gurcharn Sidhu, who returned to Punjab Agriculture University to pioneer the Green Revolution in the '60s. Many agriculture scientists from the PAU still hold important positions in Australia.

Cuisine king Manjit Singh Gujral, who has been rated as the top caterer in Australia, has made Indian-style weddings a fashion in Sydney.

As Stepan Kerkyasharian, chairman of the Ethnic Affairs Commission in New South Wales, says, 'Sikhs have come a long way. They are an industrious people. Look at the way they have established themselves in places like Woolgoolga. Their next generation is set to excel in professions as well as businesses.'

He is right.

The latest census shows that about fifty per cent of the Sikh families enjoy an annual income of forty thousand dollars as against forty-three per cent Australians.

'Numbering about fifteen thousand in the first year of the new millennium, Sikhs constitute just 0.07 per cent of the Australian population. Though they are spread all over the country, most live in the Sydney-Melbourne area,' says Harmohan Singh Walia, who was the only Sikh among the ten thousand Australians selected to carry the Sydney Olympic torch in September 2000.

'As I carried the torch through the Greenacres area, the crowd, including AMP representative Ian Dixon and Tristar representative Yvonne Arnold, roared with applause. The atmosphere became electric when Devinder Singh Dharia, Gian Chand Mastana and their team joined me with a drum. Swaying to the bhangra beat, they shouted: *Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal*,' says Walia.

The Sikh chapter in Australia began in the nineteenth century.

Having heard about this new land, many Sikh soldiers serving in the British colony of Hong Kong in the late nineteenth century, left for *Telia* (meaning Australia). When the word about *Telia* spread in Punjab, many Sikh farmers followed suit.

That was presumably the beginning of Sikh immigration into Australia.

But a few Sikhs were in Australia even before that. Apparently, the British had brought them — and Afghans — to handle camels (that were imported from north-west India to access the harsh interior of Australia) in the early nineteenth century.

All the cameleers were referred to as Afghans. Their temporary shelters were called Ghantowns. In fact, there was a permanent Ghantown in Coolgarlie in Western Australia.

'The earliest records show that one Pal Singh lived in Perth in 1886. He was a camel owner in Wyndham. Later, more Sikhs joined him. After a sickly Sikh immolated himself fearing that he would be buried, they (Sikhs) were allotted a piece of land on the banks of the Canning river to be used as a cremation ground. This is now a heritage site and marked by a plaque,' says Perth-based Sarawan Singh Vagel of the Sikh Association of Western Australia.

A TV ad by the Saving Bank of South Australia (now Bank SA) in 1984 said that one Croppo Sing (many earlier records carry the surname Sing instead of Singh) was the first person who deposited twenty-eight pounds with the bank in 1848! He was a shepherd who lived near Adelaide.

Slowly, the early Sikh immigrants moved into New South Wales and then Queensland. They would cut cane, work on banana plantations, husk corn and grow vegetables. 'Unfortunately, when these Sikhs arrived in Australia, anti-immigrant feelings were rising. White Australians, farm owners and workers' unions feared they would take away White man's jobs,' says Sydney-based Dr Gurcharn Sidhu who came to Australia in 1951.



#### A RARE HONOUR

Harmohan Walla was one of the thousands of Australians who were given the honour of carrying the Olympic Torch through Sydney during the 2000 Olympics.

Consequently, the government enacted the Immigration Regulation Act in 1901 that closed the country to coloured people. Those already resident in Australia now needed a 'certificate of exemption' to stay on.

Since Indians were British subjects, the Act was diluted for them. They (Indians) could enter Australia by clearing a dictation test in any European language. Those already residing in Australia before the 1901 Act could get a certificate of domicile.

But states like New South Wales and Queensland continued with their discriminatory laws. The Australian Workers' Union, through the 1919 Award, got immigrants banned from cane cutting.

India's role in the First World War, however, won the Indians in Australia a civil status in the 1920s. Which meant that former Indian residents of Australia could return on producing proof of residence; they could bring in their dependents, vote and become eligible for pension.

However, few took advantage of this privilege.

'Their uncertain life was not conducive to families. Many brought in only their sons,' says Sucha Singh of Cairns who came from India to join his father in 1948.

By 1947, there were almost no Sikhs in Western Australia. On the other hand, a few Sikh clusters came up around Cairns, Lismore and Woolgoolga on the Pacific Coast.

'The most significant development of that period was the settlement of a considerable number of Sikh families in Woolgoolga, about six hundred km from Sydney. Today, it resembles a Punjab village,' says Dr Sidhu.

Having snaked along the Pacific Highway through the night, our Brisbane-bound bus from Sydney approaches this hilly town with banana plantations on the fringe at the break of dawn. As the vehicle swings right to negotiate a steep curve, a dome-shaped structure heaves into view. It is the Guru Nanak Sikh Temple. No vehicle passes by without those inside craning their necks to get a view.

'We get busloads of tourists and students who are curious to know about the Sikh religion. They are given an hour-long lecture on the Sikh religion,' says Teja Singh Grewal, who has been the caretaker of the shrine since 1971.

Right opposite the Sikh shrine sits an Indian restaurant. Yards ahead lies yet another dome-shaped structure — the Raj Mahal.

With the first light, salwar-kameez clad women and turbaned men spill out on to the highway to carry on with their daily chores. As the sun rises, old Sikh men wend their way towards Solitary Island to bask in sunshine. Sikh boys and girls are on their way to school.

Welcome to Woopi, as Woolgoolga is called locally!

'It was the first Sikh settlement in Australia. The country's first gurdwara also came up here in 1968 followed by the Guru Nanak Sikh Temple in 1971. The Guru Nanak Temple was renovated in 1994 at a cost of one million dollars. It can accommodate up to a thousand



(Above & right): Woolgoolga in New South Wales was the first Sikh settlement in Australia where Sikhs control 80 per cent of banana cultivation.

(Below): Australia's first gurdwara (left) also came up in Woolgoolga in 1968, followed by the Guru Nanak Sikh Temple (right) in 1971.



### FIRST SIKH TEMPLE IN AUSTRALIA

ੴ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ

EK ON SATNAM  
(GOD IS ONE)(HIS NAME IS TRUE)



devotees. There are about three hundred Sikh families in this town of five thousand who control about eighty per cent of banana farms,' says banana farmer Prem Singh Bains.

Woolgoolga mirrors the emerging multi-cultural Australia. In this small town, Punjabi and English languages have married to create a strange hybrid. For example, if they want to say "power of attorney", they say "Tony powa de aye hain." Old women refer to the neighbouring town of Coffs Harbour as 'Coff Sahiba,' and Brisbane as Brijband.

The town boasts a full-fledged Punjabi language school. Standing on the steps of Nanak Ishar Darbar School, Prem Bains says, 'Set up in 1986, this is the first Punjabi school in Australia. Even Woolgoolga's Public School is about to start Punjabi classes.'

Known as the Missing Piece of Paradise on the Pacific Coast because of its beautiful weather, beaches and world-class surfing and fishing facilities, Woolgoolga adds to your curiosity because of its large Sikh presence.

'Tourism is a big industry in this coastal area. We have forests, lakes, beaches — Sandy Beach, Woolgoolga Beach, Headline Beach and Safety Beach — and motels. The thriving Punjabi community in a White Australian town fascinates tourists. During the tourist season, Woolgoolga's population almost doubles,' says Coffs Harbour-based attorney Akomkar Dhaliwal.

'Woolgoolga attracts worldwide attention for its Sikh community. Students and researchers from all over Australia come here to study this aspect,' says Rashmere Bhatti, who, with anthropologist Verne Dusenbury, has co-authored a book on the local community. Titled *A Punjabi Sikh Community in Australia*, it traces the journey of the Woolgoolga Sikhs up to 2001.

Born in Woolgoolga and currently serving as co-ordinator with the local Neighbourhood Centre, Rashmere says, 'The growth of the Sikh community in Woolgoolga symbolizes Australia's evolution from the White policies at the time of Federation in 1901 to multiculturalism in 2001.'

Why did the itinerant Sikh immigrants settle down in Woolgoolga?

'Till the '50s and '60s, Sikh labourers used to move up and down the Pacific Coast in search of work: cane cutting in Queensland and banana plantations in northern New South Wales. Two things happened in the '60s. One, machinery took over cane-cutting in Queensland, rendering Sikh cane-cutters without work. So, many moved down to find work on banana plantations in and around Woolgoolga. At the same time, Queensland also introduced banana cultivation with the help of machinery. However, machinery couldn't be introduced in the hilly terrain in Woolgoolga. So, Woolgoolga's White farmers sold their banana plantations to the Sikhs who still cultivate bananas manually. Here, we have one big advantage: The northern slope on which banana is grown gets plenty of sunshine that favours the crop. But in flat Queensland the crop is often destroyed by storms, not in Woolgoolga,' says Dr Amarjit More, who was the first Sikh from Woolgoolga to become an MBBS.



(Left): Gurdial and Satwinder pose with the 'heaviest bunch' at the Coffs Harbour banana show in 2001. Photo courtesy: A Punjabi Sikh Community in Australia.

(Below): Banana farmer Prem Singh Bains at his farm in Woolgoolga.



The Woolgoolga Sikhs are an agrarian community maintaining close links with Punjab. 'They are obsessed about holding on to the past and very wary of Australian culture seeping in. Boys and girls grow up traditionally and tend to get married to fellow Sikhs. Arranged marriages are still the norm. They are very rigid about social and religious code. The lack of knowledge of English is still a barrier,' says Rashmere Bhatti.

As banana farmer William Khatara Singh says, 'Woolgoolga still has *pind da mahaul*. A panchayat of sorts comprising Dr Amarjit More, Prem Bains, Rashmere Bhatti, Nasib Grewal and Teja Singh Grewal plays the role of community elders.'

Characteristically, the community introduced the mela culture into Australia in the form of Sikh National Games.

Says Prem Bains, who is an executive member of the games committee, 'The first games were held in Adelaide in 1985. Now it is an annual, three-day affair held during the Easter holidays. We get teams from Singapore, Malaysia and even India to play football, kabaddi, hockey, basketball, volleyball, and tug of war. In 2002, we had about three thousand participants.'

As Dr More and Rashmere Bhatti emphasize, the community is in transition. 'Woolgoolga's banana cultivation is in decline because of competition from North Queensland. Here Sikh farmers are reluctant to embrace newer methods of cultivation and use chemicals and pesticides. Moreover, the new generation is getting western education and embracing the outside world. They are set to become solicitors, doctors, accountants and computer experts.'

Nevertheless, old community ties remain intact as many pioneering families live in and around Woolgoolga. They fondly remember Joginder Singh, Booja Singh, Lal Singh, Ganda Singh, Baba Ram Singh, wrestler Gharne Singh, Bhola Singh, Thakur Singh More, Maha Singh and Basant Singh who laid the foundation of the community in Australia.

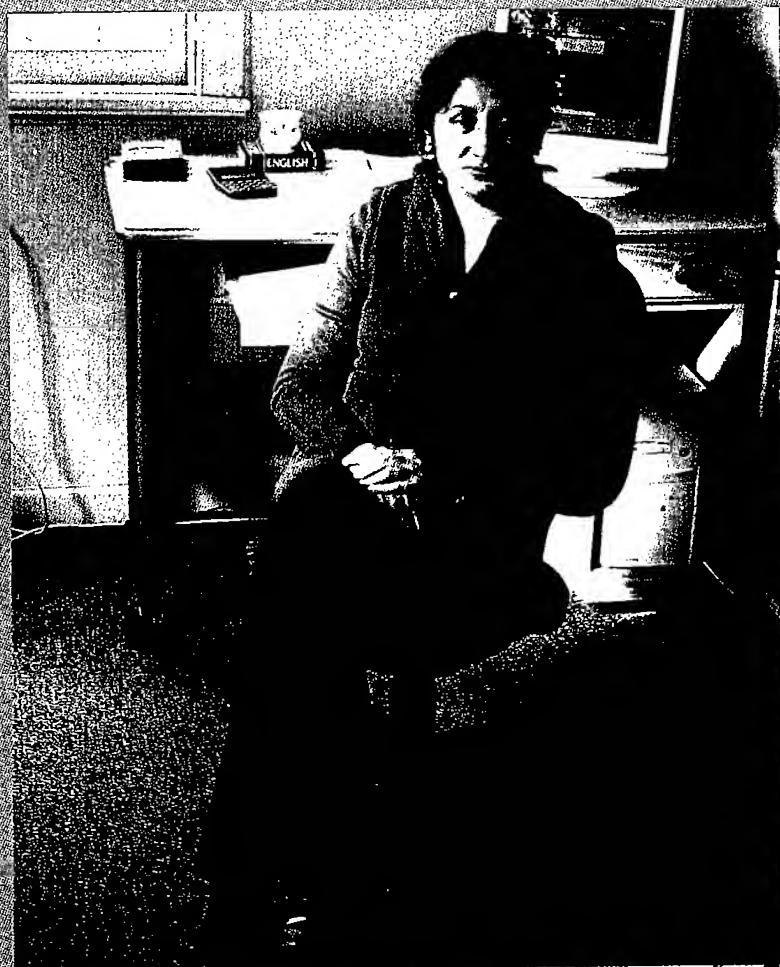
Driving his Land Cruiser up his hilly banana plantations, Prem Singh Bains says, 'Joginder Singh, Lal Singh and Ganda Singh were the first Sikhs to come to Woolgoolga in the '40s. And, Booja Singh was the first to buy a banana plantation in Holloways Road.'

Today, the Benning brothers — Jaswinder Singh and Tarlochan Singh, who have the largest banana plantation of 120 acres — produce 90,000 cartons every year.

'Apart from this, we are the first family to enter the packaging business in Woolgoolga,' says Jaswinder Singh, whose father, Kabul Singh, bought the family's first farm in the '60s.

Prem Bains' maternal grandfather, Baba Ram Singh — who came to Australia in 1898 and died in 1983 at the ripe age of 103 — brought the first copy of the Guru Granth Sahib to Australia. 'Each year on 1 January, he would invite all Sikhs to a bhog ceremony. He would tell us how he raised the first Nishan Sahib and saw the first car in this area in 1903. He lived mostly in Teven Creek near Ballina and bought his first farm at Byron Bay,' says Bains.

Bains, who himself came to Australia in 1971, has the distinction of becoming the first turbaned Sikh conductor and later a driver on the Sydney Public Transport in 1972. 'There



(Left): Rashimere Bhatti who has written a book titled *A Punjabi Sikh Community in Australia*.

(Below): Bhatti and Dr. Amarjit More (sitting second from left) were members of the organising committee for the Eighth Sikh Games held in Woolgoolga.

Photo courtesy: A Punjabi Sikh Community in Australia...



used to be a lot of racist comments. On my first day, the bus inspector objected to my headgear and people passed dirty comments. When I reported the matter to the depot master, they put an ad in the Sydney Morning Herald asking people not to harass me, but write their reservations to them.'

Bains left the job in 1972 and moved to Woolgoolga to cultivate bananas.

William Khatara Singh Malhi whose wrestler father, Gharne Singh (Gian Singh), was one of the first Sikhs in Australia to buy wheat and sheep farms, too, lives in Woolgoolga.

William Singh and his two brothers were the first Sikh children born in Australia in the 1930s. 'My father came to Australia in the 1890s and lived in Lockhart where he first worked as a hawker and then bought a farm around 1920. He went back to India to marry. My brothers — Frederick Dara Singh, James Gulzar Singh — and I were born at Lockhart. Father was of heavy built and excelled in wrestling and boxing. When he died of a grave illness in 1935 at the age of sixty-four, he owned three farms. His funeral was attended by a large number of Whites. Special permission was granted by the Council to allow the cremation to be held on one of his properties. As per his will, we all left for India with our mother and returned to Australia only in 1954. First we lived in Sydney and then in Gordonvale in Queensland before settling down in Woolgoolga in the 1960s,' says William Singh.

Gharne Singh was also one of the first Sikhs in Australia after whom a road has been named in Lockhart. 'When my grandfather died, he left an estate. I found the original Grant of Probate in the Supreme Court of New South Wales which disclosed an estate worth ten thousand pounds including his farms in Lockhart. These farms still carry his name. And the Lockhart museum still exhibits his boxing gloves,' says Gharne Singh's granddaughter, Rajinder Kaur Dhaliwal, who in 1982 became the first Sikh woman to qualify as a solicitor in Australia. She is married to Dr Akomkar Singh Dhaliwal, who migrated to Sydney in 1983 after his doctorate from PAU, Ludhiana. The latter also served as a research scientist with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) and then as a National Fellow with the University of Sydney from 1984 to 1989 before graduating in law. Rajinder and her husband jointly run a law firm "Dhaliwal Lawyers" in Coffs Harbour.

'We are the first and only private legal firm with a Sikh husband and wife practising in Australia,' says Rajinder Kaur, relaxing with her two sons — Amrinder and Munraj — at their Diggers Beach residence in Coffs Harbour.

They are a family with many "firsts" to their credit.

Having lived in Australia for four generations, the Malhis have evolved from traditional Sikhs to cosmopolitan Sikhs.

Their third and fourth generations are professionals. 'Among my three brothers, Baljit is a food technologist and Jagraj is a merchant. Only Guljit is in farming. My sister, Davinder Kaur Sidhu, is an IT expert. And our fourth generation — Rupinder Kaur Toor, Munpreet Kaur Sidhu, Sonny Singh Malhi, Cliff Singh Malhi, Timothy Singh Malhi and Romandeep Kaur — is studying either marketing and finance or computers,' says William Singh.



(Above) The 5th National Games are very popular in Australia. Here is Woolgoolga's team that won the tug-of-war in 1991.



(Right) Baba Ram Singh, who came to Australia in 1898 and died in 1973 at the age of 103, was the first to bring the holy Guru Granth Sahib to Australia.

He narrates an anecdote of how the Sikh community of Woolgoolga decided to build Australia's first gurdwara in 1967. 'One day, we were sitting in the local club sorting out a local problem. We were told by the club owner to get out as it was not the place to discuss community issues. We felt humiliated and decided to build a gurdwara. We roped in two White friends who helped us get council approval.'

The first Sikh Temple was opened by R.C. Wright, minister of works and tourist activity, on 8 June 1968, and telecast on ABC. Three years later, the community set up another — and bigger — gurdwara named Guru Nanak Sikh Temple.

Teja Singh Grewal, who has been associated with the second gurdwara since 1971, says, 'The presence of the two gurdwaras made the Whites aware about us. Today, they join us on religious occasions.'

Grandson of a pioneering Sikh, Maha Singh, who came to Australia in 1885 and cleared land in the Ballina area, Teja Singh has helped build bridges between the Sikhs and the Whites. 'I joined the community-based meal-on-wheels programme to reach out to elderly White couples. They would ask me how come you are doing this for us when your community does not mix with us. I would explain, and they generally appreciated it. I also served on the local Lions Club and the Woolgoolga Club.'

He was given the honour of performing the Sikh prayer at the inauguration of the new building of Coffs Harbour Hospital for which the Sikhs had raised four thousand dollars.

Earlier, the same hospital had honoured the Sikh community by taking farmer Piara Atwal on its board. 'I was the first Sikh in Australia to serve as chairman of a hospital board,' says Piara Atwal who lives in the Korora Basin of Coffs Harbour.

His father, Garboksh Singh Atwal, had also played a key role in setting up Woolgoolga's first gurdwara. 'The roots of my family in Australia go back to 1885 when my grandfather — Basant Singh — came to Cairns. My father joined him in 1941. And I joined my dad in 1950 and went to school for four years. At fourteen, I was on my own, worked on a dam site for a couple of years, went to Sydney where I worked during daytime and did my town planner's course during night. In those days, four students from India and I — we called ourselves *Panj Piaras* — floated the Sikh Cultural Society,' he chuckles.

In 1979, Piara Atwal left his job and with his wife — Christine whom he had married in 1963 — moved to Coffs Harbour to cultivate bananas. 'A Sikh farmer always yearns to stay close to land. My roots are in Woolgoolga where my father lived,' he winks.

Chips in Woolgoolga's first Sikh doctor, Amarjit More, 'I too set up shop in town to stay close to my roots. I have nature's bounty in the form of Woolgoolga and I have a good medical practice. On the side, I do banana cultivation. I have three farms which my son looks after.'

More's roots in Australia go back to 1900 when his grandfather, Thakur Singh, reached Queensland to work as a cane cutter. 'My father, Naranjin Singh, joined him later. I was twelve when I came to Woolgoolga and did my schooling here. Father died when I had just



(Clockwise from top):

Gharne Singh, who settled in Australia in the 1880s, was the first Sikh to buy farms Down Under. A known wrestler, he was also the first Sikh after whom a road was named in New South Wales.

Gharne Singh's granddaughter Rajinder with her husband Akomkar Dhaliwal at their Coxs Harbour residence.

Gharne Singh's son William Khatara Singh Malhi with his family.

finished my MBBS degree. So I had to stay here to look after our banana plantations. I cannot think of life outside Woolgoolga.'

Ditto for banana farmer Piara Singh Sodhi. 'All my children are doing jobs in Sydney and Brisbane, but I love Woolgoolga.'

Sodhi's grandfather, Bhola Singh, came to Australia from Nawanshahar in the early twentieth century. 'My father joined him in 1937, bought his own farm and brought me here when I was thirteen. I too cultivated bananas. No more. My children are qualified and they have moved out,' says Sodhi.

Indeed, the sons and daughters of green Woolgoolga are looking for greener pastures.

From the banana country of north New South Wales, one moves into the sugarcane country of Queensland.

As you enter Brisbane, the Sikh Temple on Logan Road is the first sign of the Punjabi community who mostly live in the Woodridge area of the city.

'There are about two hundred and fifty Punjabi families in the Brisbane area. In the Sikh shrine, up to a thousand people gather on big occasions. We hold Punjabi classes and run a weekly Punjabi programme — *Gaavo Sachi Vaani* — on the community radio Brisvani,' says temple priest Narinderpal Singh.

According to him, the Sikh community is in its infancy in Brisbane. 'We have only a few established people yet. Sohan Singh and Tarsem Singh have done well in horticulture. Jaswinder Singh is successful in poultry, and Harjinder Singh runs quite a few restaurants,' he says.

Brisbane is home to two of the most successful Sikhs in Australia: Super heavyweight wrestler Buck (Bakhtawer Singh) Samrai who represented Australia in the Commonwealth Games, and Prof Balwant Saini who is rated as one of the foremost architects of Australia.

Having retired in 1974, the septuagenarian Buck serves as chief coach of the Queensland Amateur Wrestling Association Inc. His wife, Kate, who too is a trained coach, is its secretary. 'Both of us are still deeply involved in wrestling,' says the six feet four inches tall Buck.

Sitting in his Cedar Grove lodge in the southeast suburb of Brisbane, Buck goes down memory lane. 'My father, Wariam Singh, was a scratch-pull champion of Australia in 1926-27. Since we were a family of wrestlers, I took to this sport very early in life. At DAV College, Jalandhar, I was a scholarship holder in 1946. Next year, I won the Panjab University championship and was offered an ASI's job in police. But my father wanted me to come to Australia. I would have gone far in India.'

Young Buck and his younger brother, Sital Singh, joined his father and elder brother, Sarwan Singh, in Cairns in 1948. 'Within a year, we bought our first cane farm of 100 acres and took up wrestling in a big way. In 1952, I won the Queensland super heavyweight title. Next year, I won the first Australian title.'

In 1961, he represented Australia in the world titles and finished sixth. 'In 1962, I moved to Brisbane and started professional wrestling which took me to Canada, the Philippines,



Coffs Harbour's Piara Singh Atwal seen with his daughter.

Indonesia, and Hong Kong.' In all, Buck won the Australian super heavyweight title fifteen times. At the age of forty-four, he went to the Christchurch Commonwealth Games and finished fourth. At his peak, Buck weighed 220 pounds.

A colourful character, Buck briefly ran an Indian restaurant in Brisbane.

If Buck became famous as a wrestler, his illustrious guru, Jagat Singh Pehlwan, became famous for another reason.

Sydney-based Pehlwan was employed by the Australian meat industry to prepare mutton and lamb for the Sikh soldiers serving in the Second World War. 'The British employed Pehlwan to prepare meat as per the Sikh tradition. All the tins carried the trademark: Prepared by JAGAT SINGH JHATKAI,' says Buck.

Eulogizing Pehlwan, Buck says, 'When I landed in Sydney in 1948, I met Arjun Singh (who had beaten Hamida, the cousin of Gama, to become the Indian champion) and Tiger Joginder Singh, who were on their way to New Zealand. They told me that Jagat Singh Pehlwan lived in Sydney and that I should meet him. I went to Cairns and wrote to him. He invited me to Sydney and met me at the railway station. By offering him my turban, I adopted him as my guru.'

'Pehlwan was from Bhindran village near Moga. Though he was illiterate, he knew the Guru Granth by heart and served as a gurdwara priest for a few years. He wanted to pursue wrestling, but had no money. First, he went to Singapore and then to Vancouver to serve as a gurdwara priest. Then one Jarnail Singh took him to the US where Pehlwan took up wrestling seriously. He went on to wrestle with the best in the world, and fought for the world title in Hollywood but was disqualified. His style was too vicious.'

'From the US, Pehlwan went to Fiji where he married a South Indian woman and moved to Sydney. He had two sons and a daughter. Pehlwan was very close to King Kong. A native of Hungary, King Kong's original name was Emil Gaza and he weighed four hundred pounds, stood six feet two inches tall and continued to wrestle till the age of sixty-three. He used to drink half a bottle of whiskey before the bout and the remaining half after it. I opened the bottle for him many times. He was a master wrestler, and represented Hungary in the Olympics in 1928. His son is a professor of zoology in Singapore. Any questions? I am the grandfather of the Sikh community in Australia,' laughs Buck.

Indeed, he is.

'So am I,' winks Buck's close friend and Australia's top-notch Sikh architect, Balwant Singh Saini.

A resident of Australia since 1949, Saini became the Emeritus Professor of Architecture at the University of Queensland in Brisbane after retiring from the Chair of Architecture in the same university. Renowned for his work on low-cost housing, Saini has been a consultant to construction industries, the UN, UNESCO, the South Pacific Commission, and the governments of Australia, India and Papua New Guinea. He has also chaired UNESCO's regional conference on architectural heritage.



(Above): Brisbane's Sikh Temple stands tall on the busy Logan Road.

(Right): Malaysian-born Sikh musician Dya Singh (right) has taken the *Gurbani* to international audiences by fusing *kirtan* with jazz, blues, country music, Australian indigenous music, European flute, Polish dolcimer, fiddle, Nepalese drums and tabla. Based in Australia, Dya Singh performs *kirtan* in choirs of 35 to 40 children.



An authority on tropical architecture, he has brought out many publications, including *Building in Hot Climate* and *The Australian House*, which are used as textbooks in many universities. ‘Two other titles — *Homes in the Sun: A Colonial Legacy*, and *Notes From a Family Album* — will be out soon,’ says Saini who is married to an accomplished musician, Elizabeth Morgan.

Sitting in his study at his Taringa residence, Saini goes back in time. ‘When I landed in Melbourne in 1949, I was the first Sikh in that city. There was one Sikh in Adelaide and one in Sydney. No Sikh professional had yet arrived in this country. Of course, there were a few hundred Sikh cane-cutters in the countryside who had come after the First World War. Sikhs were a rarity in Australian cities in those days.’

Saini is a child of Partition. ‘When I came to India from Lahore in 1947, I wanted to study engineering. There were only three engineering institutions in India at the time, each with a waiting list of thousands. But as I didn’t want to wait, I applied for admission to the universities in Glasgow, Birmingham and Manchester. Their response was positive, but I was advised to defer my travel plans for at least a year. The British, understandably, had decided to give first preference to their own ex-servicemen and women whose studies had been interrupted by World War II. So, I wrote to the University of Melbourne and enrolled in civil engineering and later switched to architecture. I went back to India, worked in the Project Office of Le Corbusier in Chandigarh and taught at Delhi Polytechnic for four years. Then I got an offer in Melbourne and came here in 1960,’ says Saini.

‘Though Sikhs are still like a drop in the ocean in terms of population here, they have made big strides in professions and farming. Quite a few Sikh farmers stand out for cane farming in the Cairns area up in Far North Queensland,’ he says.

Indeed, Gian Singh Bains of Gordonvale is one of the biggest cane growers in the country. Whereas the average size of sugarcane farms is less than two hundred acres, Gian Singh owns more than three thousand acres! ‘We have come a long way from the days when we had to apply for a licence to become cane-cutters,’ says Gian Singh.

His grandfather, Mangal Singh, left Bilga village near Jalandhar and joined his maternal uncle in Melbourne in 1893. He worked as a hawker for some time and saved enough to buy a wheat farm. However, he sold his farm after a few years and returned to Punjab.

Meanwhile, the Whites-only policy came into effect in 1901 and Mangal Singh couldn’t return to Australia. Instead, he went to England and later to Germany and France. ‘He did very well in France, and invited his two brothers. But Australia was where his heart was. Handing over his business in France to his brothers, he was back in Australia. This time he moved up to North Queensland to work in the cane fields. My father, Daleep Singh, joined him in 1925. He was twelve years old at the time. To begin with, my father worked on dairy farms on the Atherton Tableland. But in 1945, he returned to the sugarcane farms on the Coast,’ says Gian Singh.

Locals in Gordonvale and Cairns say Daleep Singh was an extremely hard working and honest person. One person who was impressed by his qualities was a White farmer, George Parry. ‘Parry gave his cane farm on lease to my father. Later, we acquired the farm by paying



Australia's champion-wrestler  
Buck in his younger days  
(above), and now with his wife  
Kate, at their Cedar Grove  
Lodge in Brisbane (right).

(Top right): Well-known  
architect Balwant Saini with his  
wife in Brisbane.



the whole amount. This is the farm, and this is the house where Parry lived,' says Gian Singh's younger son, Srinder Singh, with wind rustling through sugarcane fields and the distant Walsh's Pyramid adding to the beauty of the huge green expanse.

Daleep Singh was nicknamed Don. 'Because Don was easy for White people to pronounce,' says Gian Singh who came to Cairns in 1951.

'When I left India, I was sixteen. My father owned hundred acres in Gordonvale at that time. We added 130 acres in 1972, 410 acres in 1980 and 165 acres in 1986,' says Gian Singh as a cane-laden train rolls by. In 1989, the family bought a vast uncleared tract of 1,350 acres in an auction in the Mareeba Valley, 120 km west of Cairns.

It was a wild country, but the climate is suitable for cane and horticultural products. The family bulldozed the whole area plain and brought it under cultivation. Water from the Tinaroo dam is the lifeblood of this country. 'In 1997, we acquired another 1,150 acres in Mareeba. So, we have 2,500 acres in that area alone,' says Gian Singh's older son, Rajinder Singh, an electrical engineering graduate from the University of Queensland, who cultivates this area.

A twenty-five-acre dam that stores three hundred million litres of rainwater, and dozens of high-powered tractors, cane harvesters and sundry machines scattered all over convey the immensity of the farming operation in Mareeba. 'In the first year of the millennium, our seven farms — named G.R&S Singh — produced seventy thousand tonnes of high-quality sugarcane, and we are among the top cane producers,' says Rajinder Singh modestly as womenfolk of the family pick ripe fruits from the home garden.

Australia is recognized as one of the most efficient producers of sugar in the world. It has to be. With no government subsidy and more than eighty-five per cent of the produce being exported, mechanization is crucial to staying competitive.

'We also run a contract cane-harvesting business in Mareeba and created an Australian record by harvesting 140,000 tons in a single season,' says Rajinder Singh.

The status sits lightly on Gian Singh and his sons. 'We believe in sharing our good fortune with others,' he says.

The family is supporting an educational programme in his village in Punjab. 'I am supporting the Akal Academy run by the Kalgidhar Trust in my native Bilga. The Academy imparts high-quality education in English up to twelfth standard. This is my life-long mission now and I spend many months a year at the Academy,' says Gian Singh.

This most successful family in Australia also donated land to set up North Queensland's first gurdwara — Guru Nanak Sikh Temple — near Cairns in 1983, says Sucha Singh Chohan, another Sikh farmer of the area.

Well versed with the history of the Sikh cane farmers in North Queensland, Chohan says, 'When the government started land clearing schemes in Far North Queensland in the 1870s, they needed workers. The Italians came first, then the Chinese and then the Sikhs. Many Sikh hawkers moved here from Victoria.'



AUSTRALIA'S MOST SUCCESSFUL  
SIKH FAMILY IN AGRICULTURE



(Top): Daleep Singh Don (right) worked for a White farmer, George Perry (left), who later sold his farm to the hard working Sikh.

(Centre): Don's grandsons Sinder Singh (left) and Rajinder Singh at their farm.



(Above): The family with Dr Inderji Singh (left, wearing cap) at their farm house

(Left): Don's son Gian Singh with his wife



His father, Kishan Singh, came in 1898, and Chohan joined him in 1948. ‘There used to be just fifty Sikh workers in this area at the time. One Charan Singh was reported to have had a farm of a hundred acres. Then there was one Ganda Singh who owned a farm near Innsfail, ninety km from Cairns. A road is named after Ganda Singh in the town. I also had heard that eight Sikh men jointly bought a farm — Freshwater — ten km north of Cairns. When I came here, Gurdit Singh and his son Malkit Singh had just bought a farm. I cut cane for them. Don Daleep Singh was the next person to buy a farm followed by the Samrai brothers (including Buck). Then my family bought 160 acres in 1957. Karnail Singh Majhail followed us. In 2001, there were about four hundred Sikh families in the area,’ says Chohan.

The Sikh cane-cutters lived in sheds, and cooked meals in the open. ‘All of them were single. The only respite they had from the backbreaking work was on Saturdays when they would board the bus to Cairns city and do shopping. Sunday used to be a holiday. The first community function was held only in 1979 when they rented a city hall for a *bhog* ceremony. Their contact with the outside world was limited to the Sikh communities in Lismore, Woolgoolga and Coffs Harbour. In the ’60s when machinery came into cane cultivation, most Sikh cane-cutters were rendered jobless. They left for Woolgoolga and Coffs Harbour to work on manual banana plantations,’ says Chohan.

Like their banana-growing brethren in Woolgoolga, the Sikh cane farmers in North Queensland are not sure whether the next generation will stay in this profession. ‘I am not sure whether I will work on the cane farm. It is hard work,’ says Andrew Ranbir Singh, grandson of Gian Singh, who is a student in James Cook University in Townsville. His younger cousin, Nelson Gurkirit Singh, is not even willing to discuss farming. ‘It is tough, and I don’t want to be a farmer,’ he shrugs.

Adds Chohan, ‘Times are a-changing. Being educated, the next generation is making its own decisions about professions and partners. My two daughters — Ranbir and Kanwalbir — are professionals and married to White Australians.’

The trend is catching up, says Dr Gurcharn Sidhu who has been a close witness to the growth of the Sikh communities in Woolgoolga and Far North Queensland.

Sydney-based Dr Sidhu is internationally known for his pioneering work on removing cholesterol from eggs and dairy products. And he was among the first four Indian students — who had topped the Panjab University B.Sc. in agriculture in 1945, ’47, ’48 and ’49 — to come to Australia under the Colombo Plan in 1951.

On the boat from Sydney Harbour to his Manly Beach apartment, Dr Sidhu says, ‘The students’ arrival marked the second phase of Sikh immigration into Australia. We were awarded Fellowships to finish an M.Sc. in agriculture, but all of us went on to do a Ph.D. in our respective areas. We returned to Punjab to usher in the Green Revolution. These pioneers included Dr. K. Kirpal Singh (horticulture), Dr Jiwan Singh Pruthi (food science), Dr Dilbagh Singh Athwal (plant breeding), Dr Avtar Atwal (entomology) and myself (biochemistry). I was trained at Melbourne University.’

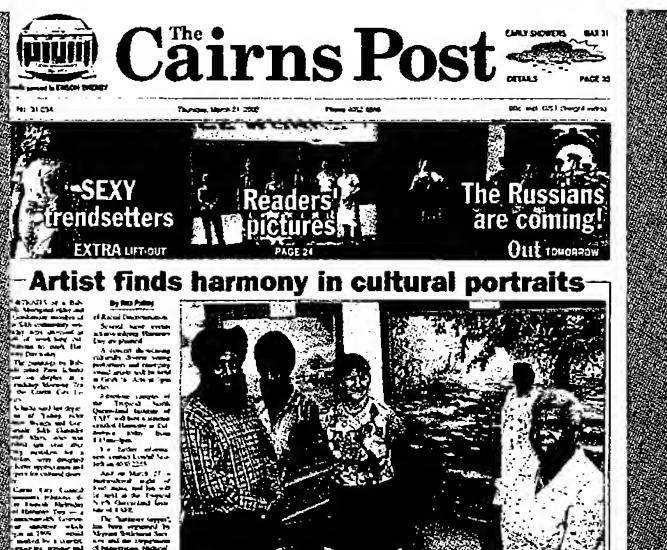


(Top): Northern Queensland's first gurdwara at Cairns was set up on the land donated by Gian Singh.

(Above): Former Indian High Commissioner G Parthasarathy visiting the Cairns gurdwara.

(Right): Cairns-based farmer Sucha Singh Chohan has the history of Sikhs in Queensland on his fingertips.

(Below): Cairns-based Gurinder Mavi was featured in the local Cairns Post in the aftermath of 9/11.





When he returned to India, Dr Sidhu was instrumental in setting up a viable research department in Biochemistry and Animal Husbandry at PAU, Ludhiana. Narrating an anecdote, he says, 'When people at PAU used to ask us why the Australian-trained scientists were better than the US-trained scientists, we would laugh and say that we had been trained by the descendants of convicts (Australia was first settled with convicts from England) who not only gave

us a good education but also taught us the tricks of successful living under trying circumstances.'

In 1966, Dr Sidhu returned to Australia to work at the CSIRO on food science.

As he explains, 'We developed insoluble substances called cyclodextrin polymers that form a complex with cholesterol which can then be easily removed.'

At present, he is a consultant with the poultry industry in producing eggs with high Omega-3 fatty acids vital for good health. 'Omega-3 fatty acids produce hormones that lower cholesterol and fat in blood and decrease blood pressure. However, these acids are not present in ordinary eggs. We feed a special diet of linseed oil (rich in fatty acids) and fish to hen which then produce enriched fatty-acid eggs called Omega-3 eggs.'

In 1978, Dr Sidhu visited the National Dairy Research Institute at Karnal as a consultant under the UNESCO Aid Programme. In 1993, Punjab Agriculture University honoured him by naming its research building after him. 'It is called the Gurcharn Singh Sidhu Animal Nutrition Centre. I am beholden to them for this honour,' he says.

Sidhu is a man of many parts. Urdu and Punjabi couplets roll off his tongue at the slightest pretext. 'Though I don't follow what he recites, I understand the message. Most of the time, it is about love,' laughs Natasha, his wife of Russian origin. A clinical psychologist, Natasha practised in the US for many years.

'Conversation never flags in his company. Sidhu is such a charmer,' says his hotelier friend Manjit Gujral.

Sidhu's makeshift studio in his Cressy Road residence in northern Sydney is littered with records from the '50s, disks, cassettes and tapes. 'Ghazals, qawwalis and semi-classical music are my ruling passion, says Sidhu, launching into a couplet *Huseen-o-jawan hain abi tak woh galian jahan hamne apni jawani luta-di*. After a pause, he resumes *Mohabbat main lut-te hain deen aur imaan, bada teer mara jawani luta-di*.

Indeed, it was Sidhu's 'legendary love' for Urdu poetry and Sufi music that landed him a broadcaster's role in the '70s. 'Back then, SBS (Special Broadcasting Service) Corporation had launched many programmes to cater to immigrant communities. I kicked off the three-hour Indian programme in Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati, Tamil and Kannada. However, I had to opt out soon because of family problems.'



The most famous Sikh in Australia, Dr. Gurdev Singh Sidhu, seen with his family, has lived in Sydney since the 1960s. Dr. Sidhu is internationally known for his work on gastrointestinal diseases.

Sidhu returned to broadcasting in 2000 with a programme called *Jhana De Kande Te* (on the banks of the Chenab river in Punjab) that included seventeen episodes each on the legendary love stories of *Heer-Ranjha* and *Sohni-Mahiwal*. ‘I named the programme so because most love stories in Punjab were played out on the banks of the Chenab river,’ he says.

He winds up the discussion on an interesting note. ‘In 1951, I met a Sikh hawker in Melbourne who gave me *Kissa Heer-Ranjha*. As we got talking, he said, “You know, these Whites are low-caste converts to Christianity. I don’t take food from them. I carry home-made panjiri (fried wheat flour mixed with fat and sugar) with me all the time”,’ says Sidhu, who was pivotal in organizing the Australian Sikh Association and constructing the Sikh Centre Gurdwara in Parklea which is the biggest in the southern hemisphere.

Architect Balwant Saini designed the structure. ‘Ajaib Sidhu, who is an electrical engineer, and Kirpal Pannu, a construction engineer, Jasbir Randhawa, Balkar Bains and Dr Sidhu played a key role in the construction. Tycoon Kartar Singh contributed about half a million dollars to it,’ says Amarjit Gujral, who runs Mother India Restaurant at Dural in northwest Sydney.

Like students, Sikh professionals also started arriving in Australia in the ’50s. However, none could settle permanently because of Australia’s ‘Whites-only’ policy. Those who married White Australians were allowed to stay only if the union produced a baby.

Funnily enough, immigration officials would knock on the door of the newly married couples every six months to check whether they had had a baby!

However, a few Sikh professionals, including engineers, architects and chemists, settled down in Australia during that period. These included Balwant Singh Saini, Ajit Singh Bhogal, Manjit Singh Sekhon, Mohinder Singh Siyali, Darshan Singh Brar, Harpal Singh Saini and Davinder Singh Siyali.

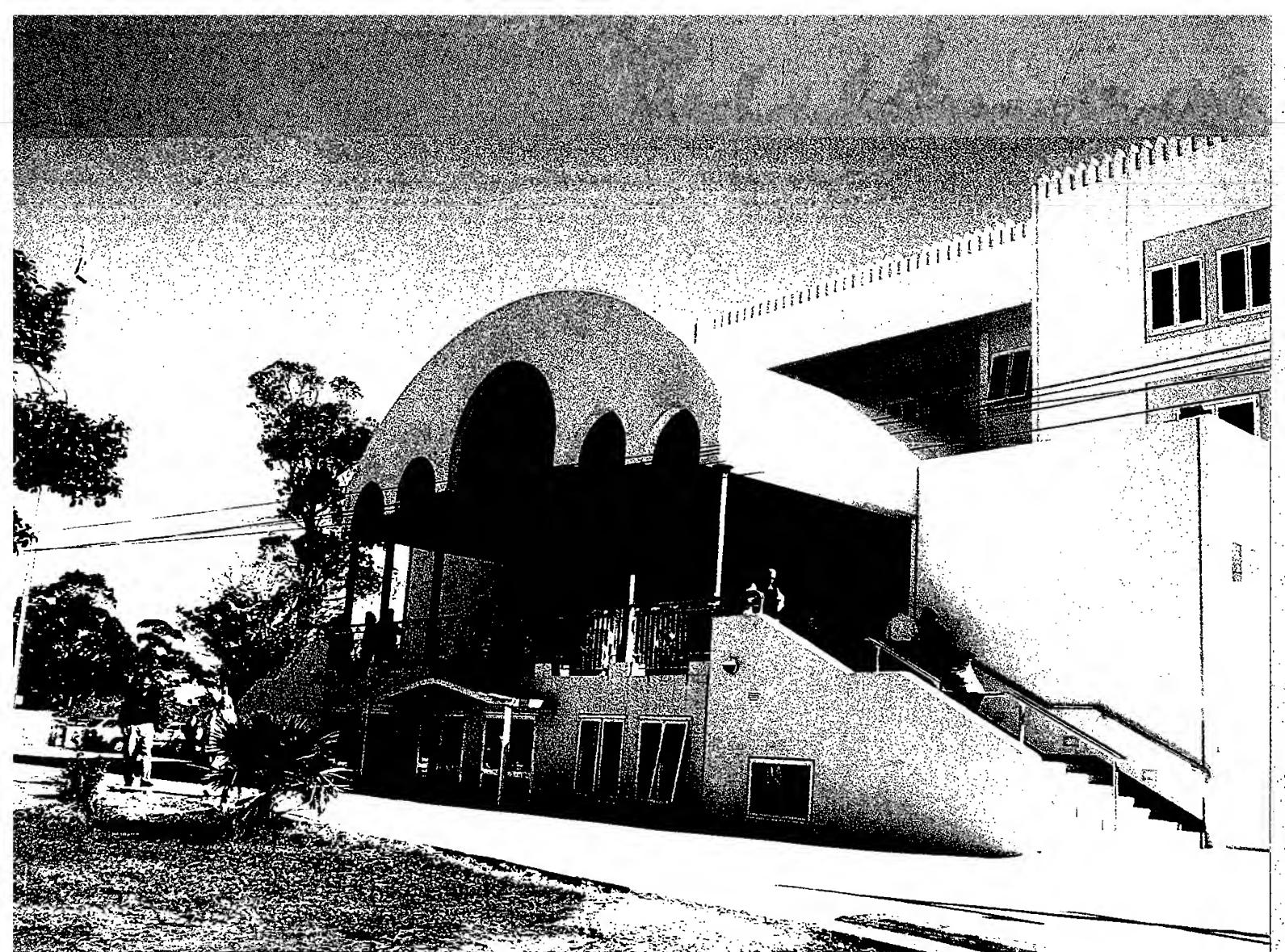
In the early ’60s, Australia relaxed its immigration rules. Under the new policy, qualified, non-White professionals were allowed into Australia. They could qualify for citizenship after fifteen years. However, in 1967 the waiting period for citizenship was also removed.

Sikh professionals who settled in Sydney during that period included Dr Balkar Singh Bains, Dr A.S. Sachdev, Dr Hardeep Singh, Dr J.S. Sekhon, Amrik Pala, Dr M.S. Brar, Dr S.K. Bhinder, Amritpal Sidhu, Manmohan Kang.

Dr Balkar Singh Bains, who was Australia’s first Sikh veterinarian, is a known name in poultry medicine. A graduate from the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Dr Bains left a promising career in soccer in Hoshiarpur to come to Australia in 1955.

‘I was in charge of the largest poultry in Queensland and taught poultry medicine for four years in Queensland and one year in New Zealand,’ he says.

Married to Karma, an Australian of Lithuanian origin, Dr Bains later served as a director of the vitamin division for Roche from 1980 to 1991 and as its director for technical services (Far East) till his retirement in 1994. He has written three books and published a number of papers on poultry during his distinguished career.



The Parklea Gurdwara in Sydney is the biggest in this part of the world.

THE GLOBAL SIKHISM ABROAD



The Parklea Gurdwara in Sydney is the biggest in this part of the world.

With Australia doing away with 'Whites-only' policy in the early '70s, many East African Sikhs, including Dr Swarn Basson, Jagir Singh, Charn Kooner, Dr Rawail Singh Lall, Bawa Jagdev, Uddham Singhota, Pritam Panesar, Sarawan Roopra, Jagdish Sian, Swarn Tung, Sahdev Grewal and Balwant Chadha, settled in and around Sydney.

During the '70s and '80s, many Sikhs came from India, Malaysia, Singapore, and England as professionals or under the family reunion scheme. 'Outstanding among them were Ajaib Sidhu, Kirpal Pannu, Dalbir Gill, Sukhdeep Rangi, Sohan Bains, Surinder Dhillon, Surjit Rana, Giani Santokh Singh, Dr Prithipal Singh Gill, Dr Wariam Batra, Lakhbir Grewal, Ajit Kalra, Resham Sahota, Ajit Gosal, Mohan Sekhon, Dr Harbans Bariana, Dr Badan Deol, Prithipal Sidhu, Raghbir Rana, Mohan Baveja, Amarjit Gujral, Surjit Gujral, Mohinder Minhas, Piara Master, Dalbir Pooni, Harcharan Grewal, Dr Parduman Singh, Manjit Gujral and Dr Inderjit Virdi,' says Dr Sidhu.

Dr Virdi is the first Indian heart surgeon to become a Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS).

And he is the only Indian doctor who has the right to practise in three continents.

'Yes, when in May 2000, the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons approved my Fellowship of the College in Cardiothoracic Surgery, I became eligible to practise in Australia as well. I am a MS and MCH from PGI, Chandigarh, and a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh,' he says while strolling on the lawns of his residence in the Riverside Gardens area of Townsville in Queensland.

His fight to have the right to practise in Australia made national headlines. 'Yes, it was a bitter fight,' he says with a shrug. Having moved to Australia from England in 1986, Dr Virdi had established his reputation as a world-class surgeon by performing numerous coronary bypass and valve replacement operations at Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital from 1989 to 1992.

But when he acquired Australian citizenship in 1992, he was no more eligible to practise in Australia. 'The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons rejected my foreign degrees, and demanded that I, as an Australian citizen now, do four years' training and then write exams to get the right to practise,' he recalls.

A shocked Dr Mark Shanahan, his mentor at the Sydney hospital, said, 'It's like telling Bradman to go to a batting school. I would put him in the top five in the world that I have worked with — and that includes Victor Chang. I can assure you that I have many times cried for this man. It is a closed shop. I am prepared to say it was bias. I am not prepared to say what sort of bias, but I hate it. It's unjust. They will deny everything. They will say they are protecting high standards. They turned their back on this man. There is absolutely no excuse.'

The harried doctor and his wife, Sonia, left Australian shores to work first at Greenlane Hospital in Auckland and later at Apollo Hospital in New Delhi even as the Australian media and the Ethnic Affairs Commission took up his case.



Based in Townsville, Queensland, the first Indian cardiothoracic surgeon in Australia, Dr. Indenit Singh Virch, seen with his family. Formerly with Apollo Hospital in Delhi, Dr. Virch, who is an MS and MCH from PGI, Chandigarh, and a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, won the right to practise in Australia after a long battle.

Photo courtesy: *The Sydney Morning Herald*

'Brilliant surgeon now not good enough for us,' screamed a front-page headline in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

After joining Apollo Hospital, Delhi, in 1995 as a senior consultant cardiothoracic surgeon, he set up its Cardiac Center for heart, lung and blood vessel surgery. During his five-year stay at Apollo, Dr Virdi operated on about two thousand patients suffering from complex heart and lung problems, with results comparable to the best units in the world. 'Then my daughters, Shona and Amy, returned to Australia after spending three years at British International School in Delhi to do their school certificate and high school certificate. This family fragmentation, in addition to stress of a busy heart surgery practice in India, was more than I could cope with. By a stroke of luck, I then won the battle with the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, and joined as a consultant cardiothoracic surgeon in Townsville Hospital, Queensland, in January 2002.

'I am happy to have paid my debt to my mother country which funded my initial training at Patiala Medical College and later at PGI, Chandigarh, to the tune of rupees twenty lakh in the '70s and '80s,' he says modestly.

Emotionally, Dr Virdi says, he will always remain deeply tied to Punjab. 'I would continue to serve my people by working at least twice a year during my holidays in a leading heart hospital in Punjab.'

Townsville was earlier home to another Sikh doctor, Dr Mukhtar Singh Sidhu. 'He came from Singapore in 1975, and now lives in Brisbane,' says Sucha Singh Chohan of Cairns, highlighting his role in setting up the Cairn gurdwara.

The late '80s and '90s also saw the arrival of many agricultural scientists from Punjab Agriculture University, Ludhiana, to Australia.

Of these PAU 'boys', Prof Harpal Singh Mavi works with the New South Wales Agriculture Department at Orange as an agro-climatologist, analyzing and computer-modelling weather conditions.

Dr Kuldip Sidhu has done a great deal of research on animal reproduction and fertility at Macquarie University.

Says Dr Harbhajan Kehal, who came from PAU in 1977 to pursue his Ph.D. at the University of Western Australia, 'Leave alone graduates and post-graduates, there are more than two hundred scientists with a Ph.D. from Punjab Agriculture University in Australia today. Having failed to land jobs related to their field, many are working as consultants, ticket sellers, guards, taxi drivers, prison officers and quarantine workers. There used to be a PAU Association in Australia, but it is defunct now.'

Chips in Dr Gurcharn Sidhu, 'So great was the migration from PAU once that there was a joke that every Singapore Airline flight from Delhi to Sydney brings yet another member from PAU and that pretty soon an alternate PAU campus would come up here.'

By 2002, there were more than fifteen thousand Sikhs in Australia. About seventy per cent of them live in Sydney and Melbourne. Walk through Lidcombe, Auburn, Paramatta,

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PRODUCE OF AUSTRALIA

(Below): Charnamat Singh of Punjab  
Growers is famous for his broccoli produce.



(Below left): Businessman Jatinderpal Singh Uppal has rendered a great service to the Punjabi community by distributing the copies of the holy Guru Granth in Australia.

(Below right): Manmohan Shergill is vice-president of the Ethnic Public Broadcasting Association of Victoria.



Blacktown, Glenwood Park in Sydney, Taylors Lake, Keilor Downs, St Albans, Thomastown, Lalor, Donvale and Cranbourne in Melbourne and you will find a fair sprinkling of the community.

As the community assumes distinct contours, the Sikhs are making an entry into many more areas like the police, the armed forces, jail services, customs and the civil service.

Sarabjit Singh is the first turbaned Sikh constable with the New South Wales Police Service. A former assistant commandant with the Border Security Force in India, Sarabjit Singh moved to Australia in 1995. 'My wife, Harpal Kaur, who was a professor at PAU in Ludhiana, got immigration to Australia. I joined the police service in 1998, while she is a quarantine officer at Sydney international airport.'

Initially, the turbaned constable was a novelty. 'But when I explained my religion to people, they got used to my turban. The department imports turbans with badges from Singapore,' he says.

Adds Sydney-based Harjit Shergill, who is also a turbaned Sikh ambulance officer in Sydney, 'Being a turbaned Sikh is not a disadvantage now. My bosses are very considerate.'

Shergill, who retired as a Lt.Col. from the Indian Army after twenty-six years of service and moved to Australia with his family in 1998, says, 'It is so informal yet a very professional service. Ditto for corrective services, parking services and railways services.'

However, the first turbaned Sikh to join the ambulance service in Australia was Resham Singh of Cairns who had to fight to win the right to wear a turban.

A few Sikh women also hold high-ranking positions in various services, including Gurmel Sidhu in corrective services.

Explains Sandal Dogra, who is a first-class officer with the corrective services, 'In Australia, jails are referred to as correctional centres and I am in the corrective service. I went through a grilling selection process that includes a five-hour psychological test, then interviews and finally a medical test. In one jail, there are four units. Each unit has sixty-four inmates. Two officers look after one unit. My unit has all male inmates, and it is a challenge to manage them.'

Sandal and her husband, Amrik Singh, who is a computer science expert, shifted to Sydney from Delhi in 1985. 'Life was a lot more comfortable on the Delhi IIT campus for us, but I like it here now. The Australians are great people,' says Sandal.

In the '80s and '90s, many gurdwaras sprang up across Australia.

According to Gosford-based Gurmit Singh, who has compiled a list of Sikh shrines in the country, the state of New South Wales has four in Sydney, one each in Griffith and Murwillumbah and two in Woolgoolga. The state of Victoria has three in Melbourne and one at Shepparton. South Australia has one each at Glossop, Renmark and Enfield.



Top) A gathering at a Kartarpuram.

Above Right) The first Sikh ambulance officer in New South Wales, Harjot Singh, with his colleagues.

Above Left) Melbourne-based Kartarpuram Singh, who edits Australia's first Punjabi paper *Indo Times*, with Victorian premier Jeff Kennett.

As mentioned above, in Queensland there are four gurdwaras — one in Brisbane, one at Gordonvale, one at Innsfail and one in Cairns (at Edmonton). Western Australia has one each at Kensington and Bayswater.

In fact, the Western Australian Sikh community grew only recently. Says Perth-based Sardul Singh, who was one of the first Sikh students to come to Western Australia in 1960, ‘When I came here, there were just six Sikh students and no Sikh family. Over the years, businessmen, professionals and unskilled Sikhs have come here. Jagjit Singh Pal, who runs the export-import business, came from Iran. Satjit Singh, who owns a few supermarkets, came from Kenya. Then there is Dr Pritam Singh who came from Fiji. He teaches in Murdoch University. Harbhajan Singh (John Singh) runs restaurants.’

There are now about four hundred families in the Perth area, says Sarawan Singh Vagel who came from Malaysia in 1981. ‘When I came, there were just thirty-five families. There has been a ten-fold increase in their numbers since then.’

In Southern Australia, there were about a hundred Sikh families in 2002. Most of them came from Malaysia. In the Riverland area, many Sikhs, including Mohinder Kahlon and Santokh Singh, are big grape growers.

To cater to the growing community, Taswinder Singh, who moved to Australia in 1991, started the first Punjabi-English monthly — *Indo Times* — from Melbourne in September 1998. ‘It is the first Punjabi paper in Australia and New Zealand,’ he says.

Every Wednesday, Taswinder Singh also broadcasts a one-hour *Punjab Di Khushboo* programme on Radio 3zzz. ‘This is an ethnic radio funded by the state government. There is a huge response to my programme because of the growing Punjabi population in Melbourne,’ he says.

Another Punjabi paper published from Melbourne is the *Sikh Link*. Launched in 1998, it is a quarterly brought out by Ranjit Kaur.

Sydney also had its first Punjabi paper in 2001 when Harpreet Singh launched *The Punjab Times*.

SBS Corporation broadcasts an hour-long Punjabi programme from Sydney and Melbourne, every alternate Thursday. ‘One Thursday, I do it from Sydney, and next Thursday Manpreet Kaur does it from Melbourne,’ says Harjit Randhawa, who has been producing this programme since February 1993.

‘We have news, views, music, culture and interviews. Feedback indicates that more than ten thousand people tune in to this programme. Apart from Punjabis in Sydney, a lot of Urdu and Punjabi speaking Pakistanis also listen to it,’ says Harjit, who shifted to Australia from Malaysia in 1980.

Interestingly, her husband, Mandhir Randhawa, was the first Sikh to be commissioned in the Royal Australian Air Force in 1980. And he is probably the only one (Sikh) in the world to have served the air forces of three countries. As Mandhir says, ‘I was first commissioned in the Malaysian Air Force in 1965. When Singapore broke away from Malaysia,



(Above): The cuisine  
King Manjit Gujral  
(turbaned) looks on as  
Australian Prime Minister  
John Howard felicitates  
his son for his culinary  
skills in Sydney.

(Right): Manjit Gujral  
hosting Feroz Khan



I, being a Singapore citizen, was commissioned in the Singapore Air Force. I was serving as a Major when the Royal Australian Air Force commissioned me in 1980. I took early retirement in 1988.'

The growing community has spawned a tandoori revolution Down Under.

Take a dinner cruise around Sydney Harbour and chances are that you will be eating Indian delicacies prepared by one of Sydney's foremost restaurateurs, Manjit Gujral. Drive down to the upmarket Darling Street, and you will come across yet another trendy Indian restaurant, again owned by Manjit Gujral.

There are more than five hundred Indian restaurants in Sydney alone, with scores opening and closing every year. But Manjit is the undisputed *badshah* of Indian cuisine.

'I have been rated as the best Indian caterer and second best for providing wedding venues in Australia in 2000 by the Australian Catering and Restaurant Association,' says Manjit, biting into tandoori chicken in his Darling Street restaurant in Balmain next to Sydney Harbour.

Mention any VVIP — from Australian Prime Minister John Howard to former cricket captain Mark Taylor to Hollywood legend Linda Kozlowski to the British actors "the two Ronnies" to Kapil Dev to Shahrukh Khan to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan to Daler Mehndi — and he has hosted them all.

No Indian dignitary or cricket team returns without savouring his delicacies.

'Prime Minister John Howard and cricketer Mark Taylor came to the International Food and Wine Festival at Hunters Hill in Sydney where all caterers presented their stuff. I created a mini India for the prime minister. And I was the pick of the lot,' he gushes.

The jovial Sikh from Chandigarh, who landed in Sydney in 1984 and was refused a job at Remington because of his turban, has redefined catering.

'I have taken catering outdoors and turned it into total event management. Which means if you hire me for an event, say a wedding, I will provide you everything: catering, bridal make-up, mehndi, the wedding dress like an achkan, mandap, havan, bhangra or giddha party, ghori and marriage certificates. My motto is: Come like a guest, go like a guest; Manjit will do the rest. I make people eat first with the eyes (decorations), then the nose (aromas) and finally with the mouth (the palate). We have catered to from twenty to two thousand people at a time.'

So fascinated are the Australians by his total-concept catering that many Whites are going in for Indian-style weddings. 'We have done many White marriages. They love it Indian style,' says his petite wife, Kamal, who is an expert in the art of fruit decoration.

At a gala function — "An Evening in Rajasthan" — organized by Maharaja Arvind Singh of Udaipur in May 2001 to help raise funds for the Prince of Wales Spinal Injury Research Institute in Sydney, Manjit sold a table (for ten people each) from two thousand dollars to ten thousand dollars. 'We raised one million dollars that night for the charity. We created a



(Above): Former Australian cricket captain Mark Taylor tries his hand at Indian cuisine.

(Left): Welcome to Manjit's.

Rajasthani ambience with Rajasthani fabric. Every male guest was given a Rajasthani turban and a female guest was given bindi-bangles — all imported from Rajasthan. Alan Jones, the top radio journalist, was the master of ceremonies that night held at Doltone House in Darling Harbour.'

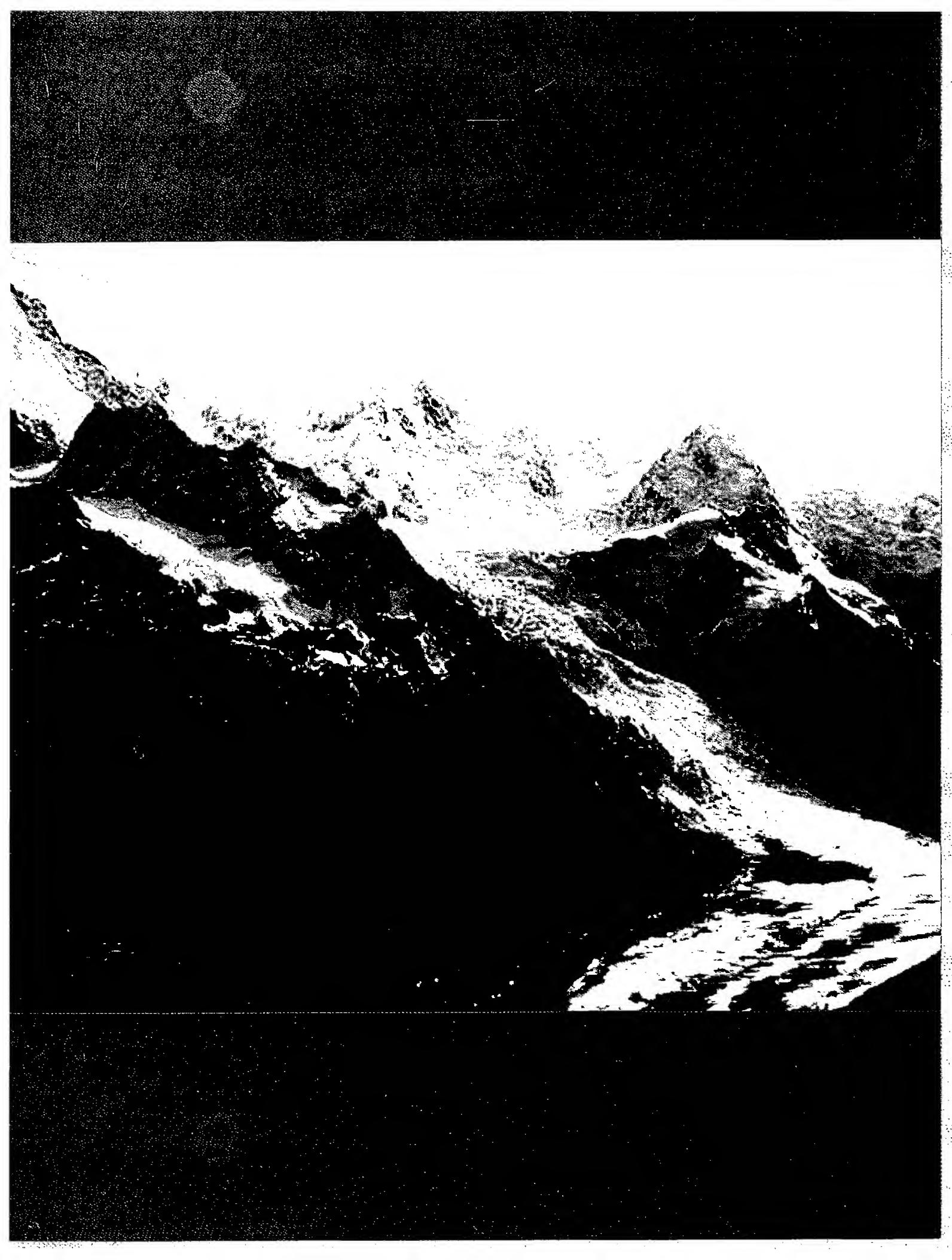
Manjit has his fingers in other pies also. He has brought Indian music to Sydney by staging shows of Bollywood stars like Shahrukh Khan and Juhi Chawla, and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Daler Mehndi and Abida Parveen.

He is launching local artists as well. Bhupinder Mintu, who has sung the famous number *Mehfil taan sajdi je nache munde di maan* in the film *Beti No. 1*, is his find.

The champion caterer has also produced a shabad series, *Sukhpaya*, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

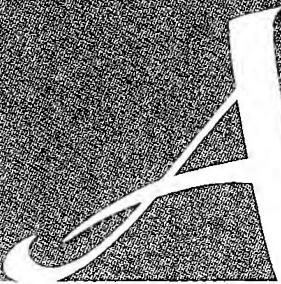
Manjit Gujral, says Christopher Kremmer of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, is 'the cuisine ambassador of India' in Sydney.

Understandably an enviable reputation.



# NEW ZEALAND:

AMONG THE LONG  
WHITE CLOUD



cross the Tasman Sea in New Zealand, 14 October 1995 was a red-letter day for the Sikh community when a first-generation Sikh immigrant, Sukhi Turner nee Gill, was elected mayor of Dunedin city.

In the process, Sukhi created history by becoming the first Indian to win an elective post in the southern hemisphere.

'It was a proud moment for someone (me) who had come to New Zealand twenty-two years ago, and was now a mayor. And I was the first woman mayor of the city. Though we in the past had people of Indian descent as race relations conciliator and human rights commissioner, none entered politics,' beams the outspoken Sukhi whose family hails from Dudeke in Punjab.

'My father, Sqn. Ldr. Jasbir Singh Gill, was in the Indian Air Force. After he retired he joined Air India. It was at Bombay that I met cricketer Glenn Turner in 1969. It was an official function at a trendy place called Bullock Cart. We swapped pleasantries.'

And hearts.

'We kept meeting on the sly while I was a student in the US. Dad got furious when he came to know about our affair. Anyhow, we got married at Southall Gurdwara in London in 1973 and commuted between England (where Glenn played county cricket) and NZ for ten years. I had read about NZ, but never thought it would be so beautiful.'

How did she enter politics?

'My major at university was history and political science. Once my young children went to school, I started taking notice of the local political scene. I disagreed with many decisions that were being made for my city and thought I should contribute my point of view. After

three years as a councillor, I thought I had better ideas and support from the community and decided to put myself forward for the mayoralty.'

Her opponents waged a dirty campaign against her. 'Being a Green, they feared I would oppose big business.'

However, Sukhi won. And the wife of the dashing Kiwi batsman went on to do a hat-trick. 'Hey, I don't know much about cricket, and Glenn does not know much about politics,' protests the three-time mayor of Dunedin.

She is by far the most well-known Asian/Indian/Sikh face in New Zealand today.

From Phomen Singh Gill — who in 1890 was the first Sikh to reach New Zealand — to Sukhi Turner, the Sikhs have covered a lot of ground in this bewitchingly beautiful country with its rolling landscape.

In 2002, there were about four thousand Sikhs in NZ, with the city of sails, Auckland, being their main address. A huge gathering of Sikhs at Auckland's Papatoetoe Gurdwara — Sri Dasmesh Darbar — on Baisakhi Day on 13 April 2002, testified to the vibrancy of the community.

'The arrival of young Sikh professionals in the 1990s has added to this vibrancy. Punjabi is taught in Sunday schools in all the major gurdwaras in Auckland and Wellington. There are three Punjabi community radio programmes — *Nachda Punjab*, *Gaouna Punjab* and *Dhol Dhamaka* — during the week, broadcasting news, views and music,' says fourth-generation New Zealander Sikh, Navtej Randhawa, who edits the country's first online Punjabi paper — [www.punjabi.co.nz](http://www.punjabi.co.nz) — launched in 2001.

Early immigration, which started with Phomen Singh and his brother, Bir Singh, in 1890, continued till 1920 when the government put discriminatory policies on the statute book. For the next thirty years, no new immigrants were allowed in.

As Phomen Singh's grandson, Peter Singh, says, 'My maternal grandfather belonged to Chirak village near Moga in Punjab which I visited in 2000. He was the son of Bella Singh Gill and was sent by the family in search of Bir Singh who had come to Australia and lost touch with the family. He was able to locate Bir Singh. The Gill brothers crossed into New Zealand in (circa) 1890.'

Phomen Singh became a successful sweet-maker. He lived first in Wellington, then in Wanganui and finally settled down in Palmerston North. 'In Wellington, he met my maternal grandmother, Margaret, who was a nurse, and married her. They had four children: Ranjit Singh, Madge (daughter), Dhuleep Singh and Esive. Madge, my mother, married Santa Singh Johal who had arrived in NZ in 1920. Back then, ours was the only Punjabi family in the Auckland area. Frankly, a part of Margaret's family never accepted Phomen Singh,' says Peter Singh, who retired as a primary school principal.

Phomen Singh died in 1934.



Dunedin mayor Sukhi Turner (with her cricketer husband Glenn Turner) is the first Indian to hold such a high political post in this part of the world. (Below) Sukhi is very popular in social circles.

'Bir Singh was a robust character. He always carried his kirpan and lived a wayward life. He hawked goods for several years. During the First World War he joined the New Zealand Army and served as a cook at the Trentham Military Camp. He married a Maori woman, and a daughter, Hinerau, was born to them. He was known as *Hathi* among fellow Punjabis. On his death in 1917, he was buried, but nobody knew where. I tried to find the burial place through the Maoris, but to no avail. Then I approached the city council for the records of death. That's how I found his grave in Terrace End Cemetery in Palmerston North. I put an inscription on it in 1997 in a ceremony attended by the city council who were pleased to know that here lies the first Punjabi settler in New Zealand,' says Peter Singh.

Peter Singh and his son, Adrian Singh, visited the Gills in Chirak and the Johals in Jandiala in Punjab in 2000 for verification of the records. Proud of his lineage, Peter Singh says his two children — Adrian and Jennifer — carry the surname Singh.

'The family had asked Phomen Singh whether he wanted the surname Gill. He preferred the surname Singh. My wife, Elizabeth, mingled freely with the local Punjabi community. Women called her sister.'

The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography prominently lists the two Gill brothers. 'The dictionary has done a great job by putting them on the national map, and we are proud,' says Peter Singh.

Between 1890 and 1910, many Sikhs followed the two brothers into New Zealand. They came via Australia, Fiji, Hong Kong or directly from India. Most early Sikhs worked as hawkers or confectioners or coalminers. Two names stand out: Ganda Singh, who worked as a coalminer, and Indar Singh, who became a trademark hawker in Waikato. The former also worked for Phomen Singh for some time, and was the first Sikh to bring his wife, Daya Kaur, to New Zealand.

'Fiji was a stepping-stone for many early Sikhs seeking entry into NZ in those days because New Zealand's Acts of 1899 and 1908 made it mandatory for immigrants to fill up a form in any European language (mostly English). Many went to Fiji to learn basic English and then came to New Zealand,' says Harbans Singh Randhawa whose father, Inder Singh Randhawa, came to NZ in 1920 and co-founded the New Zealand Indian Association in April 1926 to fight the White League.

Concentrated mostly in Central North Island of NZ, the early Sikh immigrants were employed to cut flax or scrub or dig ditches. 'Karam Singh Basi, Gurbachan Basi, Harnam Singh Bains and Gurdas Singh Kung and my father were among those who came during that period,' says Randhawa.

Even as the early Sikhs worked as labourers, a few, including Indar Singh and Harnam Singh, managed to buy small dairy farms.

After the First World War, as the immigrants increased in numbers, the government enacted the Immigration Restriction Act in 1920 to stop the inflow of outsiders. For three decades, no new immigrants entered NZ. Those who were already here faced all kind of discrimination.



(Top): A TYPICAL DAIRY FARM IN NEW ZEALAND.  
Daulat Singh Bindra at his farm.

(Above): Peter Singh (extreme left), the grandson of Phomen Singh Gill who was the first Sikh to land in New Zealand in the 1890s, is seen with his family.

'In 1925, the White New Zealand League started targeting immigrants, particularly Gujaratis. To defend ourselves, our people gathered at Pukekohe and Tamaranui in 1926 and formed the Indian Association. This body joined hands with Gujarati groups to set up the Central Indian Association,' says Harbans Singh Randhawa, who lives in the Maori heartland of Ngaruawahia where the Waikato and the Waipa rivers meet.

When the Second World War broke out, many returned to India fearing forcible conscription. However, they started returning slowly after the War. 'There used to be just about a hundred Punjabi families in this country till the Second World War,' says Randhawa.

During the 1950s, the Sikhs started acquiring farms. 'One reason was that those already owning dairy farms were heavily taxed. No one was allowed to grow too big. This gave us the chance to buy dairy farms around Hamilton. Mangal Singh's family made big strides in this profession,' says dairy farmer Daulat Singh Bindra.

During this period an amendment to the Immigration Act allowed grooms to come from outside, giving a fillip to Sikh immigration into New Zealand. 'I was the first groom to be imported into New Zealand in 1960,' laughs Ganges Singh, who, with his brother, Sakatar Singh, came from Fiji to marry two sisters: Preet Kaur and Jeet Kaur, daughters of market gardener Jawala Singh.

The growing community set up the NZ Sikh Society in 1964.

'Apart from the Indian Central Association, it was another platform to preserve our culture. In 1973, the government allowed a brother or sister to bring in one sibling. Then there was another issue — that only Whites could go to Australia. We won that right. Again, we, not the Whites, needed a passport to travel to Australia. We won that right too,' says Harbans Singh Randhawa, who was given the Queen's Medal for his life-long social work in 2000.

The NZ Sikh Society was instrumental in setting up the country's first gurdwara in Hamilton in 1977. Gurdas Singh Kung, Piyara Singh Bains, Daulat Singh Bindra, Sarawan Singh Tihara and Randhawa himself were the founding members of it. The pioneering ladies — Tej Kaur, Bakshish Kaur, Harbans Kaur and Minder Kaur — too played a great role in reviving Sikh traditions in New Zealand.

The Sikh Society raised another gurdwara at Otahuhu in Auckland in 1986. Later in 2000, the professional and business community started a new gurdwara at Papatoetoe in Auckland.

The fourth — the Ramdasia Sikh Temple — belongs to the Bombay Hills Ramdasi Singhs of Auckland. They have also started construction of a new temple at a cost of two million dollars.

Gurdwaras have also come up in Tauranga, Te Puke, Hastings and Wellington where the Sikh community has been growing since the mid '80s — a process that began in 1986 with Prime Minister David Lange relaxing immigration laws.



(Above): Baisakhi celebrations in Auckland in April 2002.

(Left): Harbans Singh Randhawa (turbaned) with his family after receiving the Queen's Medal for social work.



By 2002, there were about four thousand Sikhs in NZ. ‘There are about a hundred Sikh families who have established as dairy farmers around Hamilton. Nirmal Singh of Otorohonga, and Gurdial Singh and Juwala Singh of Pukekohe (near Auckland) stand out,’ says Ganges Singh, who has also been honoured with the Queen’s Medal for his services.

Have a swing through the beautiful Waikato country, and you meet the descendants of the pioneering dairy farmers. With more than a thousand acres, Mohan Singh Ark leads the pack. ‘We are into dairy and dry stock farming. My grandfather, Wariam Singh Ark, came here in 1910. Dad Chain Singh came in 1931, and I joined him in 1953. The Punjabis from Hawkes Bay, Wanganui and Taumarunui got together first at Waikato and set up the Hamilton-Terapa gurdwara in 1977. Till then, we used to meet in community halls. Harbans Singh Randhawa used to conduct marriage ceremonies,’ says Mohan Singh.

Interestingly, Mohan Singh and his wife, Gurmit Kaur, were the first Sikh couple whose marriage was solemnized in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib in New Zealand.

‘Back in the ’50s and ’60s, the name Singh was well respected. If you phoned a White New Zealander and told him that you are Singh and wanted this or that, he would immediately comply. No more,’ he laments.

Hari Singh Dhariwal came via England after marrying the daughter of Rattan Singh of Jabowal.

His neighbour, Daulat Singh Bindra, belongs to another illustrious family of the area. ‘My father, Basant Singh, went to Fiji in 1922, and came to NZ in 1926. In 1938, he started his own small farm of vegetables at Pukekohe. I joined him in 1950 and branched into dairy farming in 1970. Today, we have a dairy farm of five hundred acres.’

Harkrishan Singh Kung, whose family once owned a 750-acre sheep farm in the King Country, today runs two 350-acre farms in Waikato. In fact, his father, Gurdas Singh Kung, was one of the first Sikhs to buy a farm in the King Country.

‘My father was told about NZ by a friend who said that all one needed to get into NZ is to fill up a form on one’s own. So, he left his village of Chhokran near Phillaur in 1920. But by the time he reached Sydney, the NZ government had enacted the Immigration Act and banned entry for new immigrants. But those in transit were allowed in.’

Gurdas Singh Kung himself played an important role in community affairs in the ’50s and ’60s.

Fast forward. Having acquired professional degrees, children of the Waikato dairy farmers are moving out. Daulat Singh Bindra’s grandson, Onkar Singh, is an aeronautical engineer in Auckland.

Sardool Singh Bains’ son, Sukhdeep Singh, was the first to become a doctor from the Waikato dairy farming community. ‘He lives in Sydney. My other son, Jastej, is a lawyer. Our two daughters — Harpreet Kaur and Parmjit Kaur — are into marketing and consultancy, respectively,’ says Sardool Singh Bains, who owns a two hundred-acre dairy farm and belongs to a family whose roots in NZ go back to 1919.

(Below): A gathering at the Hamilton gurdwara.

(Right): Sardool Singh Bains and his wife pose with a rare picture of Hari Singh Nalwa (in the middle).



Many Sikhs have established themselves in businesses and professions in Auckland since the late '80s.

Prithipal Singh Basra towers over the others. He is a big name in real estate and is well known in the hospitality business too. He is also the president of the Central Indian Association. Basra is also the highest decorated Indian in NZ. 'Yes, I am the only recipient of the New Zealand Order of Merit for my work for the community,' he says modestly.

This modest man is a proud owner of the beautiful Poenamo Hotel on Northcote Road in Auckland.

Spread over eight acres, Poenamo is a hotel-cum-motel-cum-sports bar-cum-wholesale liquor store-cum-restaurant-cum-petro station. 'We have thirty-one rooms with three-star facilities. Most international rugby teams, and Indian and Pakistani hockey and cricket teams stay here because of our proximity to the grounds,' says Basra, showing the autographed ceilings of the bars.

Basra bought the complex from Lion Breweries for seven million dollars in 1995. 'I have built Brook View Estate which has a hundred houses and a shopping complex. Browns Bay Road properties too will be completed soon,' says the man who came to NZ from Phagwara in 1968, worked with Alcan Newsland and Union Carbide till 1980 when he quit to start a corner store. Basra has not looked back since.

On that cloudy evening, Basra goes back in time and says, 'When I came here, there used to be just fifty Sikhs in Auckland and five hundred all over NZ. There used to be only one spice shop, and no Indian restaurant. Now we have a flourishing community. Many Sikhs hold important positions. They teach in universities.'

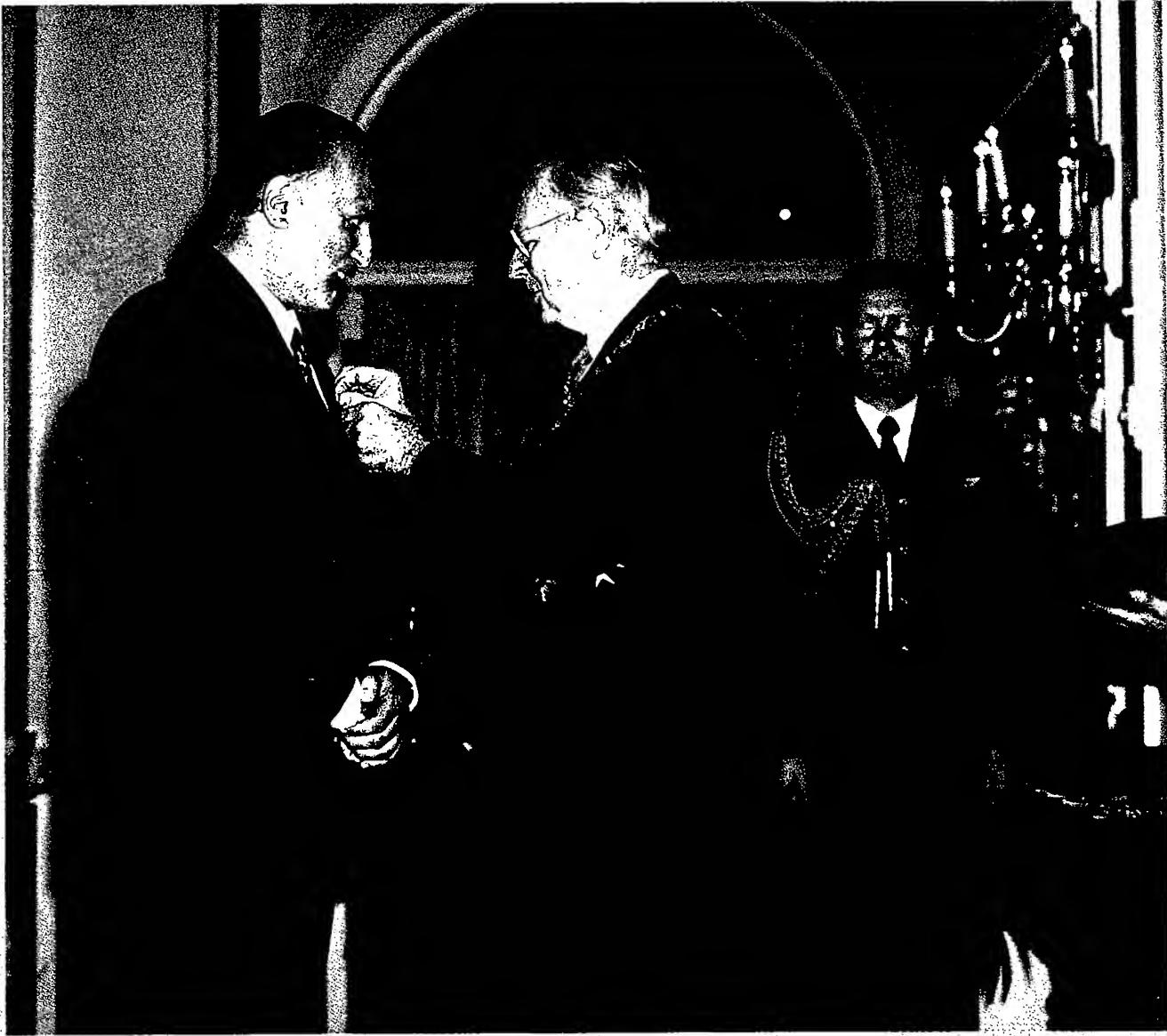
The Central Indian Association, he says, is an umbrella organization of ten regional bodies. 'We make representation to the government on behalf of all Indians in NZ. The issues on which we have made recommendations include definition of family and recognition of qualifications.'

Basra is married to Joginder Kaur, who is the daughter of a pioneer Sikh, Juwala Singh Deol.

'I have passed the torch on to my sons — Sukhwinder Singh and Harpal Singh — and am in the retirement mode,' says the most successful Sikh real estate developer in Auckland.

Another Sikh who is making his mark as a realtor is Daljit Singh. The young Sikh from Singapore has made it big in a short period. Sitting in his one-acre mansion on Mount Eden Road in the upmarket Epsom area in Central Auckland, Daljit Singh narrates his rags-to-riches story, 'My father had come to Singapore as a soldier. Later, he was a member of the INA under Netaji. We were not very rich. As a kid I wanted to do something on my own.'

After the compulsory two-and-a-half-year national service and five-year reserve service, he started his career as a commission agent in 1981. 'By coincidence, I met two Indian men who had been abandoned in Singapore by a travel agent. I helped them land a job. From that day, I decided to make human resources my career. To learn the ropes of that trade, I joined



A successful businessman, Prithpal Singh Basra is the only Indian to receive the New Zealand Order of Merit. Here he is seen receiving the award from the Governor-General.

Paul Chow. Soon I was recruiting people for a Singapore-based Korean company. But the company went bust and I had to help the laid-off people find jobs again.'

Having made enough money, young Daljit Singh decided to enter real estate. 'I built some of the landmark spots in Singapore such as Ardmore Park where an apartment is worth four million dollars and a penthouse worth twelve million dollars. I also built the light rail system. Apart from this, I had done some projects in Malaysia and Britain.'

In 1995, his group — DJ Builders and Contractors — made its entry into NZ. 'I have branched into hotels.' Modest to the core, Daljit Singh puts his success down to perseverance, discipline and being goal-oriented.

'Then I have been blessed by God. My wife, Jagdish, and our three children are complete Sikhs,' says the man who has named his mansion Guru Nanak Devji Niwas.

Another upcoming Sikh in real estate is Jatinderpal Singh, who wound up his factory business in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, and landed in Auckland one rainy Sunday evening in July 1994. 'I had four factories and sixty-five people on rolls and used to earn more than one lakh rupees a month. And here I was, not knowing a soul. Hearing my story, the taxi driver who dropped me at Auckland's Mount Eden Hotel, said, "you are either stupid or courageous".'

He proved to be courageous.

Today, he re-develops old properties and housing blocks in Auckland. 'Things are just snowballing. In 2002, I did business worth eleven million dollars.'

En route to success, JP washed dishes, worked with a "moving company," served as dial-a-driver, a manufacturing supervisor and a prison officer. 'In fact, I was the first Sikh prison officer in NZ earning more than \$85,000,' he smiles.

Rising from his chair, JP says, 'I cannot thank Capt Swarnjit Lutherera enough for giving me a leg up in those dark days.'

Indeed, Capt Lutherera has helped numerous new immigrants during their initial struggle. And he has hosted countless visitors and dignitaries from India.

Formerly a ship captain, he sailed around the world from 1963 to 1986, and lived in the US, Britain, Belgium and Australia before dropping anchor in NZ. 'I was the first non-White captain in the shipping unit of the US giant Cargill. I found NZ very different from the rest of the world. It is the most beautiful country in the world, and it has the most wonderful people on this planet,' he says, sitting in his residence in Epsom on Pah Road in central Auckland.

He started off his business with the Gateway of India restaurant on Ponsonby Road in 1990 while his wife, Gurmeet, opened an exclusive Indian boutique. Today, the Luthereras are caterers as well as realtors, with Indian food joints in Hamilton, Christ Church, and Mount Maunganui.

A society man, Capt Lutherera is known as the master of ceremonies in Indian circles. He brought live Indian music to NZ by organizing shows featuring stars such as Shahrukh Khan, Daler Mehndi, Gurdas Mann, Jagjit Singh and Kavita Krishnamurthy.

(Right): Daljit Singh (seen with his family) has made it big in real estate in Auckland.

(Below), Capt. Swarnjit Luthera, who is the spearhead of Indian social activities in Auckland, seen with his friend and Auckland Grammar School dean Allan Faull.

(Below right): A highly respected woman, Capt. Luthera's mother, Joginder Kaur is the daughter of the Guru Ka Bagh Morcha martyr Baba Pratap Singh.



His brother, H.P. Lutherā, who was formerly with the World Bank in the US, runs a computer institute and a kindergarten. Their mother, Joginder Kaur, is the daughter of Baba Pratap Singh who achieved martyrdom during the Guru Ka Bagh Morcha at Hasan Abdal near Panja Sahib in 1922. An active social worker in Auckland, she participates in the monthly Sukhmani recitation in people's homes. She was given a plaque at a local gurdwara on the 200th anniversary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's coronation.

Bringing the Sikh community into the mainstream is his goal, says Capt Lutherā. It was he who put his sons in the country's exclusive Auckland Grammar School. 'It is the best school in the country. I wanted my two sons — Inderjit and Thakurjit — who were at Rosehill College in Papakura near Auckland to go to this school. But no Sikh student had previously gone to this school because the rules didn't allow headgear and jewellery.'

School dean Allan M Faull helped Capt Lutherā out. As Faull, who is now director of international students, says, 'One of my colleagues, Malcolm, had gone to Capt Lutherā's restaurant for dinner. Lutherā sought his advice for admission for his sons. Malcolm, in turn, approached me. I impressed upon the headmaster to waive the dress code for Sikh students. The two boys were admitted in January 1995. The school, which has 2,200 students, has on its rolls its third Sikh student — Jorawar Singh — who is the son of the known Sikh realtor Daljit Singh. To ensure that he was not teased, I accompanied him around for one week.'

A founder member of the Fiji Association in Auckland, Capt Lutherā also participated in talks to defuse the Fiji crisis and met Rabuka.

Capt Lutherā's friend and former Fiji MP, Harnam Singh Golian, too lives in Auckland. A former general secretary of the Fiji Sikh Educational Society that runs the Guru Nanak Khalsa High School in Fiji, Harnam Singh was appointed to the Senate in 1982. 'My Federation Party — which I served as a general secretary for many years — has all along advocated cooperation with ethnic Fijians. It was floated in 1963 by A. D. Patel, who belonged to the family of Sardar Patel,' he says.

The Sikhs came to Fiji after the First World War to serve in the police. 'My family hails from Hiala village near Nawanshahar, and we moved to Fiji in 1922. I was born in Fiji in 1936. The Punjabis came to Fiji up to 1940, and they have done very well in sugarcane farming and played an important role in politics. There are four gurdwaras in Fiji,' says Golian whose family moved to NZ after the first Fiji coup in the late 1980s. His solicitor son, Harjeet Singh Golian, runs a manpower management agency in Auckland.

Among other Sikhs of Fiji origin in NZ are Dr Ajit Singh and Ganges Singh.

Ganges Singh was named after the ship on which he was born while his family travelled from Calcutta to Fiji. 'The captain of the ship, N.R. Burges, registered my name after the ship. We came from Virk village in Punjab. I worked for the Fiji government till 1960 when I came here to marry,' says Ganges Singh who was honoured with the Queen's Service Medal for community service in 1991. 'Harbans Singh Randhawa and I are the only two Sikhs to have achieved this honour. The government has also made me a Justice of Peace which authorizes me to verify documents,' says Ganges Singh.



(Top): Ganges Singh (seen with the New Zealand Prime Minister) and Santokh Bhullar (right) are among top-notch Sikhs in New Zealand. Bhullar, with W.H. McLeod, has co-authored a book on Sikhs in New Zealand.

(Above): Sikhs are having a great time in the Land of the Long White Cloud.

(Right): Former Fiji MP, Harnam Singh Golian (with his son), is a well-known Indian face in New Zealand.

Santokh Singh Bhullar and Dr Anoop Singh Bedi are other Sikhs who made their mark in their respective fields. As Ganges Singh says, 'Bhullar was the first Sikh to be admitted as barrister in NZ. He assisted Hew McLeod, an acclaimed historian on Sikh studies, to compile a book on the Punjabi settlement in NZ. Dr Bedi did pioneering research on potatoes. He worked with the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and later quit to set up his own True Potato Seed Company. Now we have so many professionally qualified youngsters coming into NZ.'

Indeed, Sikh doctors, IT graduates, accountants, management and financial consultants, solicitors and engineers have poured into New Zealand in large numbers in recent years.

When you land at Auckland airport, you can easily spot a turbaned Sikh cabby.

9/11 had its repercussions in NZ where Sikhs were confused with Muslims and subjected to racial slurs and attacks.

As Capt Luthera says, 'I had to put up a sign at one of my outlets, saying: "Sikhs wear turbans and keep long hair as part of their religion. Don't confuse them with Osama bin Laden." I was in the US when Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran in 1979. Many people used to shout the word Khomeini at Sikhs. The Sikhs organized special seminars in New Jersey and Maryland, inviting police chiefs to tell the people about the Sikhs. This was very educative and was televized to remove confusion. New Zealanders are very tolerant people.'

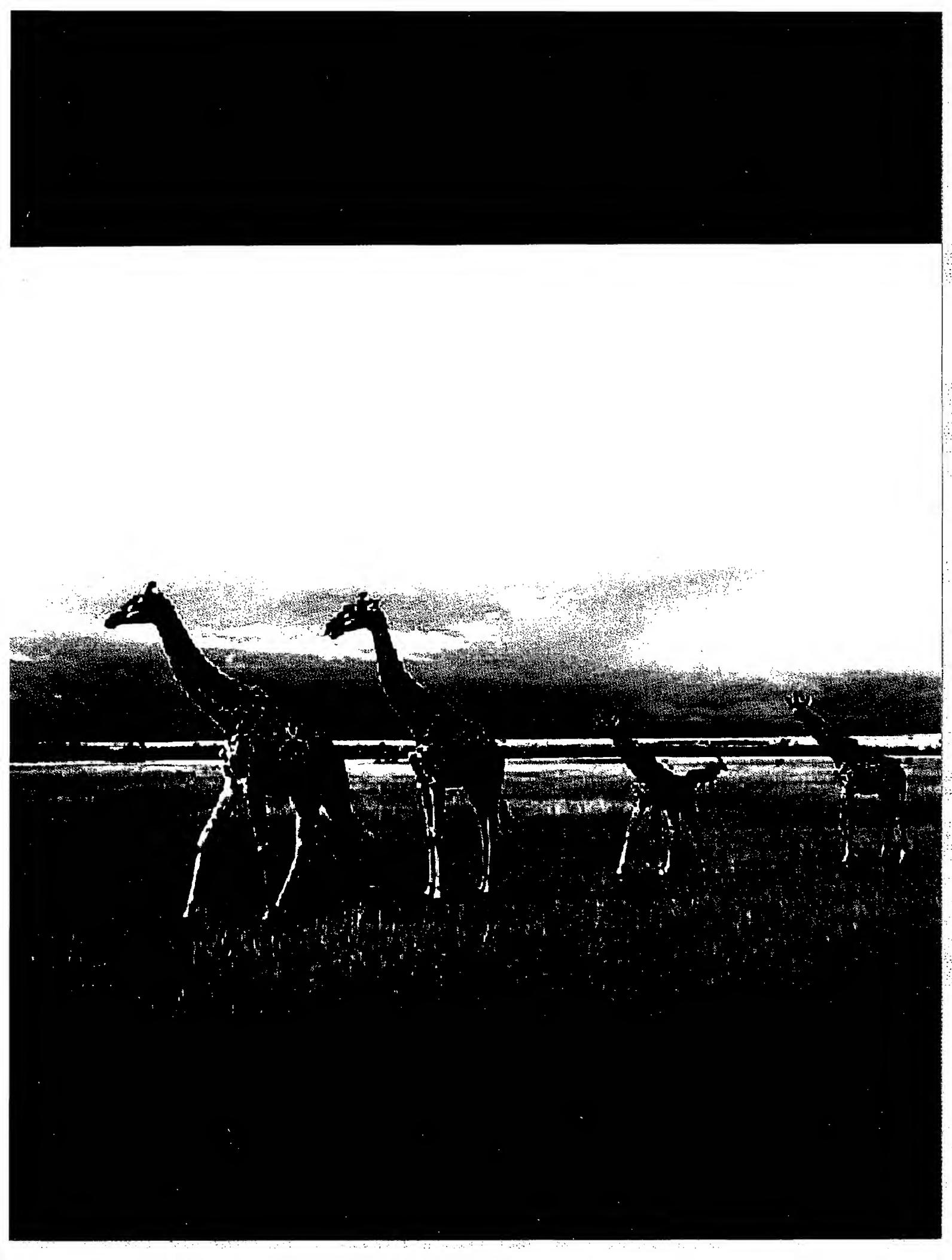
Chips in Sukhi Turner, 'Many movie lovers in India have seen New Zealand's stunning scenery. This country has outer as well as inner beauty. New Zealanders are incredibly friendly and open-minded. For me, it was a refreshing change after the racist attitudes in England.'

Ajit Singh Randhawa, who has set up a religious and cultural centre in Auckland to cater to the overseas-born Sikhs, provides a unique insight into the social and cultural evolution of the Sikh diaspora in NZ.

'In a life spanning half a century in this country', he reminisces, 'I have fond memories first as a young child in the early fifties on our sheep and bush farm in the King Country and later as a young man on the family dairy farm in the heart of Waikato.

'Then there were those heady days at the university in Auckland in the late sixties. I have seen the changing face of the community through migration. Today, there is an interesting interplay between the old established Sikh community and the newly arrived. Though I have lived — on and off — for over twenty years in my ancestral village in Punjab, there is something about the Sikh society in NZ that keeps bringing me back. One day I may put pen to paper and share with everyone my unique experiences.'

The Land of the Long White Cloud, as the native Maoris call NZ, has indeed become the land of unique experiences for Sikhs.



# EAST AFRICA:

THE SAFARI ROLLS ON

# T

he Sikhs in East Africa, particularly Kenya, are called ‘Kalasinghas’!

And thereby hangs a tale.

When Sikhs were taken to East Africa in the 1890s as soldiers to defend British interests, that is to police the Uganda Railway and hinterland routes and subdue the Kabaka (Uganda) uprising and as indentured labour to build railroad systems and open up Kenya’s Masai land reserve to the outside world, one Kala Singh became a trailblazer.

He had come to Kenya from Patiala in 1886 at the age of sixteen. An adventurer, he penetrated the Masai reserve and became famous as Kalasingha among the East Africans.

His name stuck to the community. ‘We love being addressed as Kalasinghas. The Sikhs are respected for their contribution to their adopted country,’ says Nairobi-based, three-time Safari champion Joginder Singh.

For a long time, the Kenyan Public Transport System carried a sticker, depicting the Sikhs as “Simba Wa Kenya” which means the “Lions of Kenya”.

In the first year of the new millennium, there were approximately ten thousand Sikhs in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

However, a large number of them are leaving for the West and Australia and New Zealand. ‘Because of this exodus, the East African diaspora today is almost half of what it was in the ’70s. Most Sikhs, who run labour-oriented businesses, are mainly concentrated in Nairobi in Kenya, Arusha in Tanzania and Kampala in Uganda,’ says businessman Amar Panesar of Nairobi.

In 1970, there were about fifteen thousand Sikhs in Nairobi alone. In 2002, there were just five thousand Sikhs in the whole of Kenya.

However, the Namdhari Sikhs have grown in numbers since 1953 when Sat Guru Partap Singh visited Kenya. Their first gurdwara came up at Ngara in Nairobi in 1956. Kenya officially hosted Satguru Jagjit Singh in 1962.

The Namdharis, who by the '70s had grown into their biggest concentration outside India, have made a significant contribution to the economic development of Kenya, including the setting up of a large hospital at Gatundu.

There are twenty gurdwaras across Kenya, including seven in Nairobi, seven across Tanzania and six across Uganda. The Nairobi-based Khalsa School once taught Punjabi. Punjabi programmes are still broadcast weekly, as is kirtan each morning on radio.

Makhan Singh, who spearheaded the labour movement in Kenya, is credited with starting the *Kenyan Worker* — in Punjabi and Urdu — in 1936. The paper folded up in the 1970s. However, the Sikh Society still brings out *Sikh Sandesh*.

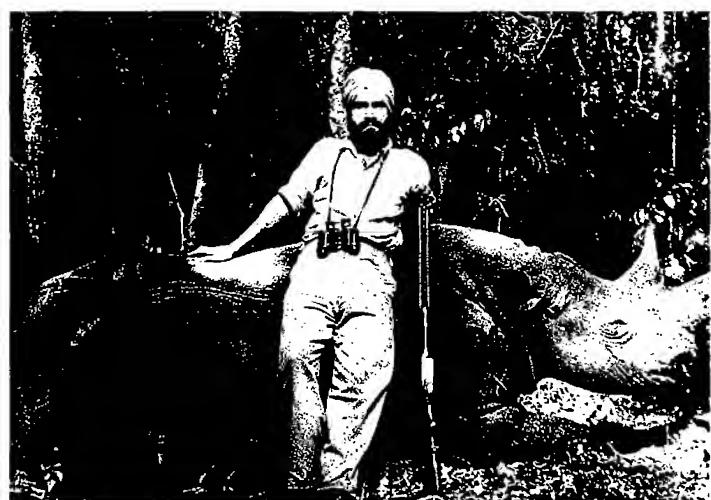
Tracing the growth of the Sikh community, Panesar says there were about a hundred Sikhs in Nairobi in 1910. This community raised its first gurdwara within a year. 'At its inauguration in 1911, the Sikhs came from Mombasa, Nakuru, Kisumu and other towns. Gurdwaras and schools came up in various towns as more and more Sikhs trickled into East Africa,' according to the Nairobi Singh Sabha.

Thanks to Baba Puran Singh, Kericho became the hub of community activities. Having immigrated to Kenya in 1916, he set up the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha to spread the universal message of Sikhism. A lover of nature, he built a garden in the Town Centre in 1962 that was later re-named after him.

With a large number of East African Sikhs immigrating to Britain, the Nishkam Sewak Jatha spread its activities there, protesting Lord Denning's controversial judgment not to recognize Sikhs as an ethnic group in 1982.

More than five thousand Sikhs held a rally and petitioned Downing Street. The result: the Sikhs won and they were defined as a racial group.

The gurdwara at Makindu on Mombasa Road is the most visible symbol of the Sikh presence in East Africa. No one passes by without partaking of *langar*.

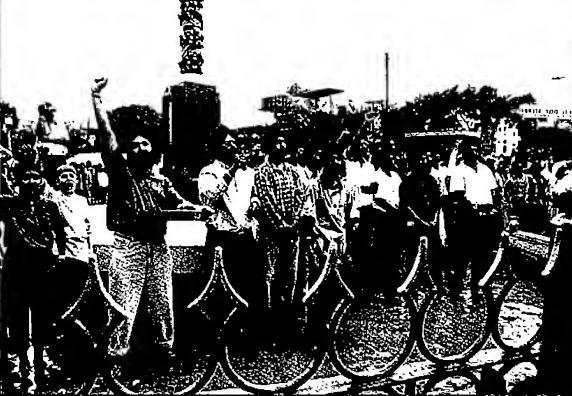


Gurcharan Singh Rana 'Kalasingha', who served with the East African Meteorological Service in Kenya, with his prize hunt in the 1940s.



(Above): The famous Sikh gurdwara at Makindo where every passenger stops by to eat *langar*.

(Right and below): Kenyan Sikhs celebrating the Khalsa tercentenary.



In 1953, the Kenyan Sikhs got a huge plot of land on Uyoma Street in Nairobi to build a new gurdwara whose foundation stone was a landmark event in the history of the East African community.

'The foundation stone was laid at an impressive ceremony on 16 January 1959 jointly by Sardar Mohan Singh, Sardar Santokh Singh Mehta, Sardar Kartar Singh, Sardar Jaswant Singh and Sardar Labh Singh. Sardar Santa Singh, the road contractor, tarmacked the open space inside the gurdwara. The building was completed in 1963 and opened by Sardar Inder Singh Gill on 1 November 1963. The flag was hoisted by Sardar Jodh Singh, retired chief inspector of police,' says the Singh Sabha. The tercentenary celebrations, V-300, under young Amarjit Singh, were another glorious event in the history of the community.

Apart from Kala Singh, Makhan Singh, the Safari brothers, Justice Chanan Singh, Kirpal Singh Sagoo and Avtar Singh Sohal are other pioneers in East Africa.

Makhan Singh is known as the father of the labour movement in Kenya. A visionary, he once said, 'The main task before us is to forge a strong unity with Africans for the common cause of democratic advance in this country. Learn the language of the people — Swahili. Teach the best of your culture, learn the best from African culture. This way lies our salvation and this is the way out.'

The names of the Safari brothers — Joginder Singh and Jaswant Singh — will always be written in golden letters in the history of East African Sikhs. Popularly known as the Flying Sikhs and 'Simba Wa Kenya,' Joginder Singh (with his brother Jaswant Singh) has become a legend in his own lifetime by winning the African Safari thrice. Born in Nairobi, Joginder Singh says he was fascinated by speed from his childhood. The young lad learnt the tricks of speed from his father, Batan Singh, who owned garages in Kericho and Nairobi. Though he did not take up motor racing till the age of 26, Joginder Singh went on to create new records.

He took part in the gruelling rally twenty-two times and completed it nineteen times. 'My brother and I were the winners in 1965, 1974 and 1976,' he says with a broad smile.

Amazingly, the two brothers won the 1965 safari in a self-prepared, privately entered Volvo PV 544. 'Twice we finished second, once third, twice fourth and thrice fifth,' he adds. In the process, the two brothers became the first persons of non-European origin to win the World Championship Rally in 1965. Joginder Singh added more "feathers to his turban" by winning the Kenya National Rally Championship five times and the East African Rally Championship three times. 'In my entire life I won more than fifty times in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, and achieved top places in rallies in Australia, the Ivory Coast, Greece, Sweden, Ethiopia, Norway and Austria.'

For his accomplishments, Joginder Singh was declared the "Motor Sportsman of the Year" in 1970 and 1976. He entered the HALL OF FAME in 1995. 'Out of the ten nominations, I was the only Asian and Sikh to be given this honour,' he says modestly.

Motor clubs around the world have bestowed honours on the motorman who runs a spare parts company called Alpine Auto Parts Ltd in Nairobi.



The Fiat Spider is a record-setting  
and fastest Spider - and  
now by winning the grueling  
East African Safari.

124 • THE FEDERAL MOTORCAR COMPANY



Narrating an interesting episode during the 1970 Safari, Amar Panesar says, 'A Sikh named Bhambra was doing commentary on the event for an ethnic radio channel. When the Safari brothers won, Bhambra was so overwhelmed that he lost his voice, threw away the microphone and ran towards the two brothers. The Sikh community took the two brothers on their shoulders to the city gurdwara.'

In hockey, the Nairobi Kenya Sikh Union produced many players who donned the national colours at international meets. Avtar Singh Sohal created a record by captaining the Kenyan team at many Olympics.

Many Sikhs have played cricket for Kenya.

Kirpal Singh Sagoo was the first Sikh to receive the Order of British Empire in this former British Colony. The octogenarian Sagoo, who now lives in Canada, was given the OBE for his lasting contribution to educational, social, economic, religious, and cultural spheres.

Justice Chanan Singh was the first Sikh to rise to the highest position in the judiciary.

The Sikhs have done exceedingly well in the hotel and tourism business. The Sarova Group, set up in 1974 and owned by the Vohra family, is ranked as the second biggest hotel chain in Kenya. Managed by a third-generation Sikh, Sandy Vohra, the Sarova Group owns seven hotels and resorts in East Africa. In the year 2002, the Group, which employs more than 1,400 people, did business worth 1.4 billion Kenyan shillings.

Sandy's father, G.S. Vohra, and his partner, John Kariuki, kicked off the group by buying Ambassadeur Hotel on Moi Avenue in Nairobi in 1974.

Two years later, the two partners acquired the twenty-two-acre, 340-room Whitesands Hotel on the north coast of Mombasa. The hotel offers the best facilities in water sports in Kenya. The Stanley Hotel, which the group acquired in 1978, is Nairobi's leading hotel.

The rise of the group coincided with the tourist boom in Kenya in the 1980s. It opened a luxury tented camp called Sarova Mara in the world renowned Masai Mara game reserve. The tents are spread along two valleys to give one an authentic bush experience. Bush catering only adds to the experience.

Apart from Sarova Mara, the group also owns the Sarova Lion Hill in the heart of the Rift Valley in the Lake Nakuru National Park and the Sarova Shaba Lodge in the Shaba Game Reserve.

As mentioned, a large number of Sikhs left East Africa after Kenya's independence in 1962 and Idi Amin's crackdown in Uganda in 1972. Among those who made it big in Britain, North America and elsewhere include Mota Singh who became the first Asian-Sikh judge in Britain and Dr Preetam Singh who became the first Sikh QC in Britain.

In the year 2000, Gurdev Singh Birdi became the first Sikh to hold a political office in Kenya. He was elected ahead of thirty-six councillors to chair the Kilifi County Council.



(Anti-clockwise from top)

King Mswati III of Swaziland  
welcomes former Indian High  
Commissioner Dr Jaspal Singh.

Kirpal Singh Sagoo with the Maharaja  
of Patiala (centre).

Pop singer Sukhbir.

Dalip Singh Dhaniwal who owns the  
famous Travellers Beach Resort.



Birdi's father, Nand Singh, migrated to Kenya in 1939 and settled in Nairobi's Parkland area. Birdi was born in 1949. Educated at Mbheni Primary School and Technical High School, Birdi spent three years doing a course in plumbing. Today, he runs three companies — farms, construction and investments.

Nairobi's Sukhbir is the *badshah* of Indipop. Born to a granthi who hailed from Jalandhar, Sukhbir has mixed bhangra with rap, reggae, and African rhythms to create what he calls New Stylee.

It was also the name of his first album released in 1994 in India, Africa and the Gulf. Its hit song *Punjabi Munde Paun Bhangra* made Sukhbir a household name. 'It notched up record sales and I was nominated for the Channel (V) Awards,' he says.

His next album *Kurian Te Mundeyan Di Gal Ban Gayee* broke all records, topping the charts and earning him a platinum disc. The next album *Hai Energy*, with its title songs *Sauda Khara Khara* also did well.

Sukhbir began his career with kirtan. On the route to stardom, he performed in nightclubs in Nairobi and Mombasa. Fluent in Swahili, English, Portuguese and Spanish, the ponytailed Sukhbir says, 'I cater to diverse audiences through my production company Dolphin.'

In the neighbouring Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, many Sikhs came as indentured labour in the nineteenth century. Today, there are hardly any. However, one name stands out: Jagdish Singh Koonjul who has represented this beautiful island nation at the United Nations for years. For the month of January in 2002, Mumbai-educated Koonjul was the president of the UN Security Council.

'There is only one Sikh family in Port Louis who are into the pharmaceutical business,' he says.

Tracing the roots of the family, his wife, Manpreet, says her paternal great grandfather came to Mauritius from Lucknow. 'But then the family line went missing. People move on in search of greener pastures.' True. Very true.



Kirpal Singh Sagoo with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi during her visit to Kenya.



# CONCLUSION

In less than a hundred years, the Sikhs have become global citizens. Mini Punjabs are springing up all over.

In many places, they are at the helm. As the new millennium unfolds, many more are likely to follow in the footsteps of Dalip Singh Saund and Ujjal Dosanjh.

As Gurinder Mann, of the University of California, Santa Barbara, predicts, ‘the next renaissance in Sikh religion and culture will happen outside India.’ He is right. It was British-born Punjabi *mundas* who revolutionized the music and cultural scene by siring Indipop.

Ujjal Dosanjh says the rise of an intellectual class among Sikhs is a matter of time. ‘We need thinkers and writers to raise our profile,’ he says.

Writers like Shauna Singh Baldwin and Simon Singh have already sown the seeds of this trend.

Financially, Sikhs are in the top bracket in the US, Canada, England, New Zealand, Australia and Singapore.

The next generations have their job cut out.

